THE TRAGIC MUSE

HENRY JAMES

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VOL. III.

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BY

HENRY JAMES

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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THE TRAGIC MUSE.

I.

Mr. Carteret was propped up on pillows, and in this attitude, beneath the high, spare canopy of his bed, presented himself to Nick's picture-seeking vision as a figure in a clever composition or a novel. He had gathered strength, though this strength was not much in his voice; it was mainly in his brighter eye and his air of being pleased with himself. He put out his hand and said: "I dare say you know why I sent for you;" upon which Nick sank into the seat he had occupied the day before, replying that he had been delighted to come, whatever the reason. Mr. Carteret said nothing more about the division or the second reading; he only murmured that they were keeping the newspapers for him. "I'm rather behind—I'm rather behind," he went on; "but two or three quiet mornings will make it all right. You can go back to-night, you know—you can easily go back." This was the only thing not quite straight that Nick saw in him—his making light of his young friend's flying to and fro. Nick sat looking at him with a sense that was half compunction and

half the idea of the rare beauty of his face, to which, strangely, the waste of illness now seemed to have restored some of its youth. Mr. Carteret was evidently conscious that this morning he should not be able to go on long, so that he must be practical and concise. "I dare say you know—you have only to remember," he continued.

"You know what a pleasure it is to me to see you—there can be no better reason than that."

"Hasn't the year come round—the year of that foolish arrangement?"

Nick thought a little, asking himself if it were really necessary to disturb his companion's earnest faith. Then the consciousness of the falsity of his own position surged over him again, and he replied: "Do you mean the period for which Mrs. Dallow insisted on keeping me dangling? Oh, that's over."

"And are you married—has it come off?" the old man asked, eagerly. "How long have I been ill?"

"We are uncomfortable, unreasonable people, not deserving of your interest. We are not married," Nick said.

"Then I haven't been ill so long," Mr. Carteret sighed, with vague relief.

"Not very long—but things *are* different," Nick continued.

The old man's eyes rested on his, and Nick noted how much larger they appeared. "You mean the arrangements are made—the day is at hand?"

"There are no arrangements," Nick smiled: "but why should it trouble you?"

"What then will you do—without arrangements?" Mr. Carteret's inquiry was plaintive and childlike.

"We shall do nothing—there is nothing to be done. We are not to be married—it's all off," said Nick. Then he added: "Mrs. Dallow has gone abroad."

The old man, motionless among his pillows, gave a long groan. "Ah, I don't like that."

"No more do I, sir."

"What's the matter? It was so good—so good."

"It wasn't good enough for her," Nick Dormer declared.

"For her? Is she so great as that? She told me she had the greatest regard for you. You're good enough for the best, my dear boy," Mr. Carteret went on.

"You don't know me; I *am* disappointing. Mrs. Dallow had, I believe, a great regard for me; but I have forfeited her regard."

The old man stared at this cynical announcement: he searched his companion's face for some attenuation of the words. But Nick apparently struck him as unashamed; and a faint colour coming into his withered cheek indicated his mystification and alarm. "Have you been unfaithful to her?" he demanded, considerately.

"She thinks so—it comes to the same thing. As I told you a year ago, she doesn't believe in me."

"You ought to have made her—you ought to have made her," said Mr. Carteret. Nick was about to utter some rejoinder when he continued: "Do you remember what I told you I would give you if you did? Do you remember what I told you I would give you on your wedding-day?"

"You expressed the most generous intentions; and I remember them as much as a man may do who has no wish to remind you of them."

"The money is there—I have put it aside."

"I haven't earned it—I haven't earned a penny of it. Give it to those who deserve it more."

"I don't understand—I don't understand," Mr. Carteret murmured, with the tears of weakness coming into his eyes. His face flushed and he added: "I'm not good for much discussion; I'm very much disappointed."

"I think I may say it's not my fault—I have done what I can," returned Nick.

"But when people are in love they do more than that."

"Oh, it's all over!" Nick exclaimed; not caring much now, for the moment, how disconcerted his companion might be, so long as he disabused him of the idea that they were partners to a bargain. "We've tormented each other and we've tormented you; and that is all that has come of it."

"Don't you care for what I would have done for you—shouldn't you have liked it?"

"Of course one likes kindness—one likes money. But it's all over," Nick repeated. Then he added: "I fatigue you, I knock you up, with telling you these uncomfortable things. I only do so because it seems to me right you should know. But don't be worried—everything will be all right."

He patted his companion's hand reassuringly, he leaned over him affectionately; but Mr. Carteret was not easily soothed. He had practised lucidity all his life, he had expected it of others and he had never given his assent to an

indistinct proposition. He was weak, but he was not too weak to perceive that he had formed a calculation which was now vitiated by a wrong factor—put his name to a contract of which the other side had not been carried out. More than fifty years of conscious success pressed him to try to understand; he had never muddled his affairs and he couldn't muddle them now. At the same time he was aware of the necessity of economizing his effort, and he evidently gathered himself, within, patiently and almost cunningly, for the right question and the right induction. He was still able to make his agitation reflective, and it could still consort with his high hopes of Nick that he should find himself regarding the declaration that everything would be all right as an inadequate guarantee. So, after he had looked a moment into his companion's eyes, he inquired:

"Have you done anything bad?"

"Nothing worse than usual," laughed Nick.

"Everything should have been better than usual."

"Ah, well, it hasn't been that—that I must say."

"Do you sometimes think of your father?" Mr. Carteret continued.

Nick hesitated a moment. "*You* make me think of him—you have always that pleasant effect."

"His name would have lived—it mustn't be lost."

"Yes, but the competition to-day is terrible," Nick replied.

Mr. Carteret considered this a moment, as if he found a serious flaw in it; after which he began again: "I never supposed you were a trifler."

"I'm determined not to be."

"I thought her charming. Don't you love her?" Mr. Carteret asked.

"Don't ask me that to-day, for I feel sore and resentful. I don't think she has treated me well."

"You should have held her—you shouldn't have let her go," the old man returned, with unexpected fire.

His companion flushed at this, so strange it seemed to him to receive a lesson in energy from a dying octogenarian. Yet after an instant Nick answered modestly enough: "I haven't been clever enough, no doubt."

"Don't say that—don't say that," Mr. Carteret murmured, looking almost frightened. "Don't think I can allow you any mitigation of that sort. I know how well you've done. You're taking your place. Several gentlemen have told me. Hasn't she felt a scruple, knowing my settlement on you was contingent?" he pursued.

"Oh, she hasn't known—hasn't known anything about it."

"I don't understand; though I think you explained somewhat, a year ago," Mr. Carteret said, with discouragement. "I think she wanted to speak to me—of any intentions I might have in regard to you—the day she was here. Very nicely, very properly she would have done it, I'm sure. I think her idea was that I ought to make any settlement quite independent of your marrying her or not marrying her. But I tried to convey to her—I don't know whether she understood me—that I liked her too much for that, I wanted too much to make sure of her."

"To make sure of me, you mean," said Nick. "And now, after all, you see you haven't."

"Well, perhaps it was that," sighed the old man, confusedly.

"All this is very bad for you—we'll talk again," Nick rejoined.

"No, no—let us finish it now. I like to know what I'm doing. I shall rest better when I do know. There are great things to be done; the future will be full—the future will be fine," Mr. Carteret wandered.

"Let me say this for Julia: that if we hadn't been sundered her generosity to me would have been complete, she would have put her great fortune absolutely at my disposal," Nick said, after a moment. "Her consciousness of all that naturally carries her over any particular distress in regard to what won't come to me now from another source."

"Ah, don't lose it," pleaded the old man, painfully.

"It's in your hands, sir," reasoned Nick.

"I mean Mrs. Dallow's fortune. It will be of the highest utility. That was what your father missed."

"I shall miss more than my father did," said Nick.

"She'll come back to you—I can't look at you and doubt that."

Nick shook his head slowly, smiling. "Never, never, never! You look at me, my grand old friend, but you don't see me. I'm not what you think."

"What is it—what is it? *Have* you been bad?" Mr. Carteret panted.

"No, no; I'm not bad. But I'm different."

"Different?"

"Different from my father—different from Mrs. Dallow—different from you."

"Ah, why do you perplex me?" moaned the old man. "You've done something."

"I don't want to perplex you, but I *have* done something," said Nick, getting up.

He had heard the door open softly behind him and Mrs. Lendon come forward with precautions. "What has he done—what has he done?" quavered Mr. Carteret to his sister. She however, after a glance at the patient, motioned Nick away and, bending over the bed, replied, in a voice expressive at that moment of a sharply contrasted plenitude of vital comfort:

"He has only excited you, I'm afraid, a little more than is good for you. Isn't your dear old head a little too high?" Nick regarded himself as justly banished and he quitted the room with a ready acquiescence in any power to carry on the scene of which Mrs. Lendon might find herself possessed. He felt distinctly brutal as he heard his host emit a soft, troubled exhalation of assent to some change of position. But he would have reproached himself more if he had wished less to guard against the acceptance of an equivalent for duties unperformed. Mr. Carteret had had in his mind, characteristically, the idea of an enlightened agreement, and there was something more to be said about that.

Nick went out of the house and stayed away for two or three hours, quite ready to consider that the place was quieter and safer without him. He haunted the abbey, as usual, and sat a long time in its simplifying stillness, turning over many things. He came into the house again at the luncheon-hour, through the garden, and heard, somewhat to his surprise and

greatly to his relief, that Mr. Carteret had composed himself promptly enough after their agitating interview. Mrs. Lendon talked at luncheon much as if she expected her brother to be, as she said, really quite fit again. She asked Nick no embarrassing question; which was uncommonly good of her, he thought, considering that she might have said: "What in the world were you trying to get out of him?" She only told our young man that the invalid had very little doubt he should be able to see him again, about half-past seven, for a *very* short time: this timid emphasis was Mrs. Lendon's single tribute to the critical spirit. Nick divined that Mr. Carteret's desire for further explanations was really strong and had been capable of sustaining him through a bad morning —capable even of helping him (it would be a secret and wonderful momentary victory over his weakness) to pass it off for a good one. He wished he might make a sketch of him from the life, as he had seen him after breakfast; he had a conviction he could make a strong one, and it would be a precious memento. But he shrank from proposing this—Mr. Carteret might think it unparliamentary. The doctor had called while Nick was out, and he came again at five o'clock, without our young man's seeing him. Nick was busy in his room at that hour: he wrote a short letter which took him a long time. But apparently there had been no veto on a resumption of talk, for at half-past seven the old man sent for him. The nurse, at the door, said: "Only a moment, I hope, sir?" but she took him in and then withdrew.

The prolonged daylight was in the room, and Mr. Carteret was again established on his pile of pillows, but with his head

a little lower. Nick sat down by him and began to express the hope that he had not upset him in the morning; but the old man, with fixed, expanded eyes, took up their conversation exactly where they had left it.

"What have you done—what have you done? Have you associated yourself with some other woman?"

"No, no; I don't think she can accuse me of that."

"Well, then, she'll come back to you, if you take the right way with her."

It might have been droll to hear Mr. Carteret, in his situation, giving his views on the right way with women; but Nick was not moved to enjoy that diversion. "I've taken the wrong way. I've done something which will spoil my prospects in that direction for ever. I've written a letter," Nick went on; but his companion had already interrupted him.

"You've written a letter?"

"To my constituents, informing them of my determination to resign my seat."

"To resign your seat?"

"I've made up my mind, after no end of reflection, dear Mr. Carteret, to work in a different line. I have a project of becoming a painter. So I've given up the idea of a political life."

"A painter?" Mr. Carteret seemed to turn whiter.

"I'm going in for the portrait in oils: it sounds absurd, I know, and I only mention it to show you that I don't in the least expect you to count upon me." Mr. Carteret had continued to stare, at first; then his eyes slowly closed and

he lay motionless and blank. "Don't let it trouble you now; it's a long story and rather a poor one; when you get better I'll tell you all about it. We'll talk it over amicably, and I'll bring you to my side," Nick went on hypocritically. He had laid his hand on Mr. Carteret's again: it felt cold, and as the old man remained silent he had a moment of exaggerated fear.

"This is dreadful news," said Mr. Carteret, opening his eyes.

"Certainly it must seem so to you, for I've always kept from you (I was ashamed, and my present confusion is a just chastisement) the great interest I have always taken in the" —Nick hesitated, and then added, with an intention of humour and a sense of foolishness—"in the pencil and the brush." He spoke of his present confusion; but it must be confessed that his manner showed it but little. He was surprised at his own serenity, and had to recognize that at the point things had come to now he was profoundly obstinate and quiet.

"The pencil—the brush? They're not the weapons of a gentleman," said Mr. Carteret.

"I was sure that would be your view. I repeat that I mention them only because you once said you intended to do something for me, as the phrase is, and I thought you oughtn't to do it in ignorance."

"My ignorance was better. Such knowledge isn't good for me."

"Forgive me, my dear old friend. When you're better you'll see it differently."

"I shall never be better now."

"Ah, no," pleaded Nick, "it will do you good after a little. Think it over quietly and you'll be glad I've stopped being a humbug."

"I loved you—I loved you as my son," moaned the old man.

Nick sank on his knee beside the bed and leaned over him tenderly. "Get better, get better, and I'll be your son for the rest of your life."

"Poor Dormer—poor Dormer!" Mr. Carteret softly wailed.

"I admit that if he had lived I probably shouldn't have done it," said Nick. "I dare say I should have deferred to his prejudices, even if I thought them narrow."

"Do you turn against your father?" Mr. Carteret asked, making, to disengage his arm from the young man's touch, an effort in which Nick recognized the irritation of conscious weakness. Nick got up, at this, and stood a moment looking down at him, while Mr. Carteret went on: "Do you give up your name, do you give up your country?"

"If I do something good my country may like it," Nick contended.

"Do you regard them as equal, the two glories?"

"Here comes your nurse, to blow me up and turn me out," said Nick.

The nurse had come in, but Mr. Carteret managed to direct to her an audible, dry, courteous "Be so good as to wait till I send for you," which arrested her, in the large room, at some distance from the bed, and then had the effect of making her turn on her heel with a professional laugh. She appeared to think that an old gentleman with the fine manner of his

prime might still be trusted to take care of himself. When she had gone Mr. Carteret went on, addressing Nick, with the inquiry for which his deep displeasure lent him strength: "Do you pretend there is a nobler life than a high political career?"

"I think the noble life is doing one's work well. One can do it very ill and be very base and mean in what you call a high political career. I haven't been in the House so many months without finding that out. It contains some very small souls."

"You should stand against them—you should expose them!" stammered Mr. Carteret.

"Stand against them—against one's own party?"

The old man looked bewildered a moment at this; then he broke out: "God forgive you, are you a Tory—are you a Tory?"

"How little you understand me!" laughed Nick, with a ring of bitterness.

"Little enough—little enough, my boy. Have you sent your electors your dreadful letter?"

"Not yet; but it's ready, and I sha'n't change my mind."

"You will—you will; you'll think better of it, you'll see your duty," said the old man, almost coaxingly.

"That seems very improbable, for my determination, crudely and abruptly as, to my great regret, it comes to you here, is the fruit of a long and painful struggle. The difficulty is that I see my duty just in this other effort."

"An effort? Do you call it an effort to fall away, to sink far down, to give up *every* effort? What does your mother say, heaven help her?" Mr. Carteret pursued, before Nick could answer the other question.

"I haven't told her yet."

"You're ashamed, you're ashamed!" Nick only looked out of the western window at this; he felt himself growing red. "Tell her it would have been sixty thousand; I had the money all ready."

"I sha'n't tell her that," said Nick, redder still.

"Poor woman—poor dear woman!" Mr. Carteret whimpered.

"Yes, indeed; she won't like it."

"Think it all over again; don't throw away a splendid future!" These words were uttered with a recovering flicker of passion. Nick Dormer had never heard such an accent on his old friend's lips. But the next instant Mr. Carteret began to murmur: "I'm tired—I'm very tired," and sank back with a groan and with closed lips.

Nick assured him tenderly that he had only too much cause to be exhausted, but that the worst was over now. He smoothed his pillows for him and said he must leave him, he would send in the nurse.

"Come back—come back," Mr. Carteret pleaded before he quitted him; "come back and tell me it's a horrible dream."

Nick did go back, very late that evening; Mr. Carteret had sent a message to his room. But one of the nurses was on the ground this time and she remained there with her watch in her hand. The invalid's chamber was shrouded and darkened; the shaded candle left the bed in gloom. Nick's interview with his venerable host was the affair of but a moment; the nurse interposed, impatient and not understanding. She heard Nick tell Mr. Carteret that he had posted his letter

now, and Mr. Carteret flashed out, with an acerbity which savoured still of the sordid associations of a world he had not done with: "Then of course my settlement doesn't take effect!"

"Oh, that's all right," Nick answered, kindly; and he went off the next morning by the early train—his injured host was still sleeping. Mrs. Lendon's habits made it easy for her to be present in matutinal bloom at the young man's hasty breakfast, and she sent a particular remembrance to Lady Agnes and (when Nick should see them) to the Ladies Flora and Elizabeth. Nick had a prevision of the spirit in which his mother at least would now receive hollow compliments from Beauclere.

The night before, as soon as he had quitted Mr. Carteret, the old man said to the nurse that he wished her to tell Mr. Chayter that, the first thing in the morning, he must go and fetch Mr. Mitton. Mr. Mitton was the first solicitor at Beauclere.

II.

THE really formidable thing for Nick was to tell his mother: a truth of which he was so conscious that he had the matter out with her the very morning he returned from Beauclere. She and Grace had come back the afternoon before from Lady St. Dunstans', and knowing this (she had written him her intention from the country), he drove straight from the station to Calcutta Gardens. There was a little room there, on the right of the house-door, which was known as his own room, but in which of a morning, when he was not at home, Lady Agnes sometimes wrote her letters. These were always numerous, and when she heard our young man's cab she happened to be engaged with them at the big brass-mounted bureau which had belonged to his father, where, behind an embankment of works of political reference, she seemed to herself to make public affairs feel the point of her elbow.

She came into the hall to meet her son and to hear about Mr. Carteret, and Nick went straight back into the room with her and closed the door. It would be in the evening paper and she would see it, and he had no right to allow her to wait for that. It proved indeed a terrible hour; and when, ten minutes later, Grace, who learned up-stairs that

her brother had come back, went down for further news of him she heard from the hall a sound of voices which made her first pause and then retrace her steps on tiptoe. She mounted to the drawing-room and crept about there, palpitating, looking at moments into the dull street and wondering what on earth was going on. She had no one to express her wonder to, for Florence Tressilian had departed and Biddy, after breakfast, had betaken herself, in accordance with a custom now inveterate, to Rosedale Road. Her mother was crying passionately—a circumstance tremendous in its significance, for Lady Agnes had not often been brought so low. Nick had seen her cry, but this almost awful spectacle had seldom been given to Grace; and it forced her to believe at present that some dreadful thing had happened.

That was of course in order, after Nick's mysterious quarrel with Julia, which had made his mother so ill and which now apparently had been followed up with new horrors. The row, as Grace mentally phrased it, had had something to do with this incident, some deeper depth of disappointment had opened up. Grace asked herself if they were talking about Broadwood; if Nick had demanded that, in the conditions so unpleasantly altered, Lady Agnes should restore that pretty property to its owner. This was very possible, but why should he so suddenly have broken out about it? And moreover their mother, though sore to bleeding about the whole business—for Broadwood, in its fresh comfort, was too delightful—would not have met this pretension with tears, inasmuch as she had already declared that they couldn't decently continue to make use of the place. Julia had said

of course they must go on, but Lady Agnes was prepared with an effective rejoinder to this. It didn't consist of words —it was to be austerely practical, was to consist of letting Julia see, at the moment she should least expect it, that they quite wouldn't go on. Lady Agnes was ostensibly waiting for that moment—the moment when her renunciation would be most impressive.

Grace was conscious of how, for many days, her mother and she had been moving in darkness, deeply stricken by Nick's culpable (oh, he was culpable!) loss of his prize, but feeling there was an element in the matter they didn't grasp, an undiscovered explanation which would perhaps make it still worse, though it might make *them* a little better. Nick had explained nothing; he had simply said: "Dear mother, we don't hit it off, after all; it's an awful bore, but we don't," as if that were, under the circumstances, an adequate balm for two aching hearts. From Julia, naturally, satisfying attenuations were not to be looked for; and though Julia very often did the thing you wouldn't suppose she was not unexpectedly apologetic in this case. Grace recognized that in such a position it would savour of apology for her to impart to Lady Agnes her grounds for letting Nick off; and she would not have liked to be the person to suggest to Julia that any one looked for anything from her. Neither of the disunited pair blamed the other or cast an aspersion, and it was all very magnanimous and superior and impenetrable and exasperating. With all this Grace had a suspicion that Biddy knew something more, that for Biddy the tormenting curtain had been lifted.

Biddy came and went in these days with a perceptible air

of detachment from the tribulations of home. It made her fortunately very pretty—still prettier than usual; it sometimes happened that at moments when Grace was most angry she had a faint, sweet smile which might have been drawn from a source of private consolation. It was perhaps in some degree connected with Peter Sherringham's visit, as to which the girl was not silent. When Grace asked her if she had secret information and if it pointed to the idea that everything would be all right in the end, she pretended to know nothing (What should she know? she asked, with the loveliest candour), and begged her sister not to let Lady Agnes believe that she was any better off than they. She contributed nothing to their gropings toward the light save a better patience than theirs, but she went with noticeable regularity, on the pretext of her foolish modelling, to Rosedale Road. She was frankly on Nick's side; not going so far as to say he had been right, but saying distinctly that she was sure that, whatever had happened, he couldn't help it. This was striking, because, as Grace knew, the younger of the sisters had been much favoured by Julia and would not have sacrificed her easily. It associated itself in the irritated mind of the elder with Biddy's frequent visits to the studio and made Miss Dormer ask herself whether the crisis in Nick's and Julia's business had not somehow been linked to that unnatural spot.

She had gone there two or three times while Biddy was working, to pick up any clue to the mystery that might peep out. But she had put her hand upon nothing, save once on the personality of Gabriel Nash. She found this strange

creature, to her surprise, paying a visit to her sister—he had come for Nick, who was absent: she remembered how they had met him in Paris and how he had frightened her. When she asked Biddy afterwards how she could receive him that way Biddy replied that even she, Grace, would have some charity for him if she could hear how fond he was of poor Nick. He talked to her only of Nick—of nothing else. Grace observed how she spoke of Nick as injured, and noted the implication that some one else had ceased to be fond of him and was thereby condemned in Biddy's eyes. It seemed to Grace that some one else had at least a right not to like some of his friends. The studio struck her as mean and horrid; and so far from suggesting to her that it could have played a part in making Nick and Julia fall out, she only felt how little its dusty want of consequence could count one way or the other for Julia. Grace, who had opinions on art, saw no merit whatever in those "impressions" on canvas, from Nick's hand, with which the place was bestrewn. She didn't wish her brother to have talent in that direction; yet it was secretly humiliating to her that he had not more.

Nick felt a pang of almost horrified penitence, in the little room on the right of the hall, the moment after he had made his mother really understand that he had thrown up his seat and it would probably be in the evening papers. That she would take it badly was an idea that had pressed upon him hard enough; but she took it even worse than he had feared. He measured, in the look that she gave him when the full truth loomed upon her, the mortal cruelty of her discomfiture: her face was like that of a passenger on a ship who sees the

huge bows of another vessel towering close out of the fog. There are visions of dismay before which the best conscience recoils; and though Nick had made his choice on all the grounds there were a few minutes in which he would gladly have admitted that his wisdom was a dark mistake. His heart was in his throat, he had gone too far; he had been ready to disappoint his mother—he had not been ready to destroy her.

Lady Agnes, I hasten to add, was not destroyed; she made, after her first drowning gasp, a tremendous scene of opposition, in the face of which Nick speedily fell back upon his intrenchments. She must know the worst, he had thought; so he told her everything, including the little story of the forfeiture of his "expectations" from Mr. Carteret. He showed her this time not only the face of the matter but what lay below it; narrated briefly the incident in his studio which had led to Julia Dallow's deciding that she couldn't after all put up with him. This was wholly new to Lady Agnes; she had had no clue to it, and he could instantly see how it made the case worse for her, adding a hideous positive to an abominable negative. He perceived now that, distressed and distracted as she had been by his rupture with Julia, she had still held to the faith that their engagement would come on again; believing evidently that he had a personal empire over the mistress of Harsh which would bring her back. Lady Agnes was forced to recognize that empire as precarious, to forswear the hope of a blessed renewal, from the moment it was a question of base infatuations on his own part. Nick confessed to an infatuation but did his best to show her it was not base;

that it was not (since Julia had had faith in his loyalty) for the person of the young lady who had been discovered posturing to him and whom he had seen but half a dozen times in his life. He endeavoured to give his mother a notion of who this young lady was and to remind her of the occasion, in Paris, when they all had seen her together. But Lady Agnes's mind and memory were a blank on the subject of Miss Miriam Rooth, and she wanted to know nothing whatever about her: it was enough that she was the cause of their ruin, that she was mixed up with his unspeakable folly. Her ladyship needed to know nothing of Miss Rooth to allude to her as if it were superfluous to give a definite name to the class to which she belonged.

But she gave a name to the group in which Nick had now taken his place, and it made him feel, after the lapse of years, like a small blamed, sorry boy again; for it was so far away he could scarcely remember it (besides there having been but a moment or two of that sort in his happy childhood), the time when his mother had slapped him and called him a little fool. He was a big fool now—a huge, immeasurable one; she repeated the term over and over, with high-pitched passion. The most painful thing in this painful hour was perhaps his glimpse of the strange feminine cynicism that lurked in her fine sense of injury. Where there was such a complexity of revolt it would have been difficult to pick out particular complaints; but Nick could see that to Lady Agnes's imagination he was most a fool for not having kept his relations with the actress, whatever they were, better from Julia's knowledge. He remained indeed freshly surprised at the ardour with

which she had rested her hopes on Julia. Julia was certainly a combination—she was fascinating, she was a sort of leading woman and she was rich; but after all (putting aside what she might be to a man in love with her), she was not the keystone of the universe. Yet the form in which the consequences of his apostasy appeared most to come home to Lady Agnes was the loss, for the Dormer family, of the advantages attached to the possession of Mrs. Dallow. The larger mortification would round itself later; for the hour the damning thing was that Nick had really made Julia a present of an unforgivable grievance. He had clinched their separation by his letter to his electors; and that above all was the wickedness of the letter. Julia would have got over the other woman, but she would never get over his becoming a nobody.

Lady Agnes challenged him upon this low prospect exactly as if he had embraced it with the malignant purpcse of making Julia's return impossible. She contradicted her premises and lost her way in her wrath. What had made him suddenly turn round if he had been in good faith before? He had never been in good faith—never, never; he had had from his earliest childhood the nastiest hankerings after a vulgar little daubing, trash-talking life; they were not in him, the grander, nobler aspirations—they never had been—and he had been anything but honest to lead her on, to lead them all on, to think he would do something: the fall and the shame would have been less for them if they had come earlier. Moreover, what need under heaven had he to tell Charles Carteret of his cruel folly on his very death-bed?—as if he mightn't have let it all alone and accepted the benefit the old

man was so delighted to confer. No wonder the old man would keep his money for his heirs, if that was the way Nick proposed to repay him; but where was the common sense, where was the common charity, where was the common decency, of tormenting him with such vile news in his last hours? Was he trying what he could invent that would break her heart, that would send her in sorrow down to her grave? Weren't they all miserable enough, and hadn't he a ray of pity for his wretched sisters?

The relation of effect and cause, in regard to his sisters' wretchedness, was but dimly discernible to Nick, who however easily perceived that his mother genuinely considered that his action had disconnected them all, still more than she held they were already disconnected, from the good things of life. Julia was money, Mr. Carteret was money, and everything else was poverty. If these precious people had been primarily money for Nick, it was after all a gracious tribute to his distributive power to have taken for granted that for the rest of the family too the difference would have been so great. For days, for weeks and months afterward the little room on the right of the hall seemed to our young man to vibrate, as if the very walls and window-panes still suffered, with the most disagreeable ordeal he had ever been through.

III.

That evening—the evening of his return from Beauclere—Nick was conscious of a keen desire to get away, to go abroad, to leave behind him the little chatter his resignation would be sure to produce in an age of publicity which never discriminated as to the quality of events. Then he felt it was better to stay, to see the business through on the spot. Besides, he would have to meet his constituents (would a parcel of cheese-eating burgesses ever have been "met" on so queer an occasion?) and when that was over the worst would be over. Nick had an idea that he knew in advance how it would feel to be pointed at as a person who had given up a considerable chance of eventual "office" to take likenesses at so much a head. He wouldn't attempt, down at Harsh, to touch on the question of motive; for, given the nature of the public mind of Harsh, that would be a strain on his faculty of expression. But as regards the chaff of the political world and of society he had an idea he should find chaff enough for answers. It was true that when his mother chaffed him in her own effective way he had felt rather flattened out; but then one's mother might have a heavier hand than any one else.

He had not thrown up the House of Commons to amuse himself; he had thrown it up to work, to sit quietly down

and bend over his task. If he should go abroad his mother might think he had some weak-minded view of joining Julia Dallow and trying, with however little hope, to win her back —an illusion it would be singularly pernicious to encourage. His desire for Julia's society had succumbed, for the present at any rate, to an irresistible interruption—he had become more and more conscious that they spoke a different language. Nick felt like a young man who has gone to the Rhineland to "get up" his German for an examination—committed to talk, to read, to dream only in the new idiom. Now that he had taken his jump everything was simplified, at the same time that everything was pitched in a higher, more excited key; and he wondered how in the absence of a common dialect he had conversed on the whole so happily with Julia. Then he had after-tastes of understandings tolerably independent of words. He was excited because every fresh responsibility is exciting, and there was no manner of doubt that he had accepted one. No one knew what it was but himself (Gabriel Nash scarcely counted—his whole attitude on the question of responsibility was so wanton), and he would have to ask his dearest friends to take him on trust. Rather, he would ask nothing of any one, but would cultivate independence, mulishness and gaiety and fix his thoughts on a bright if distant morrow. It was disagreeable to have to remember that his task would not be sweetened by a sense of heroism; for if it might be heroic to give up the muses for the strife of great affairs, no romantic glamour worth speaking of would ever gather round an Englishman who in the prime of his strength had given up great or even small affairs for the

muses. Such an original might himself privately, perversely regard certain phases of this inferior commerce as a great affair; but who would give him the benefit of that sort of confidence—except indeed a faithful, clever, excited little sister Biddy, if he should have the good luck to have one? Biddy was in fact all ready for heroic flights and eager to think she might fight the battle of the beautiful by her brother's side; so that Nick had really to moderate her and remind her that his actual job was not a crusade, with bugles and banners, but a gray, sedentary grind, whose charm was all at the core. You might have an emotion about it, and an emotion that would be a help, but this was not the sort of thing you could show—the end in view would seem ridiculously small for it. Nick asked Biddy how one could talk to people about the "responsibility" of what she would see him pottering at in his studio.

Nick therefore didn't talk any more than he was forced to, having moreover a sense that that side of the situation would be plentifully looked after by Gabriel Nash. He left the burden of explanation to others, meeting them on the ground of inexhaustible satire. He saw that he should live for months in a thick cloud of irony, not the finest air of the season, and he adopted the weapon to which a person whose use of tobacco is only occasional resorts when every one else produces a cigar—he puffed the empirical, defensive cigarette. He accepted the idea of a mystery in his behaviour and abounded so in that sense that his critics were themselves bewildered. Some of them felt that they got, as the phrase is, little out of him—he rose in his good-humour so much higher than the "rise"

they had looked for—on his very first encounter with the world after his scrimmage with his mother. He went to a dinner-party (he had accepted the invitation many days before), having seen his resignation, in the form of a telegram from Harsh, announced in the evening papers. The people he found there had seen it as well, and the most imaginative of them wanted to know what he was going to do. Even the least imaginative asked if it were true he had changed his politics. He gave different answers to different persons, but left most of them under the impression that he had remarkable conscientious scruples. This however was not a formidable occasion, for there happened to be no one present he was particularly fond of. There were old friends whom it would not be so easy to satisfy—Nick was almost sorry, for an hour, that he had so many old friends. If he had had more enemies the case would have been simpler; and he was fully aware that the hardest thing of all would be to be let off too easily. Then he would appear to himself to have been put on his generosity, and his deviation would wear its ugliest face.

When he left the place at which he had been dining he betook himself to Rosedale Road: he saw no reason why he should go down to the House, though he knew he had not done with that yet. He had a dread of behaving as if he supposed he should be expected to make a farewell speech, and was thankful his eminence was not of a nature to create on such an occasion a demand for his oratory. He had in fact nothing whatever to say in public—not a word, not a syllable. Though the hour was late he found Gabriel Nash established in his studio, drawn thither by the fine exhilaration,

of having seen an evening paper. Trying it late, on the chance, he had been told by Nick's servant that Nick would sleep there that night, and he had come in to wait, he was so eager to congratulate him. Nick submitted with a good grace to his society—he was tired enough to go to bed, but he was restless too—in spite of feeling now, oddly enough, that Nash's congratulations could add little to his fortitude. He had felt a good deal, before, as if he were in Nash's hands; but now that he had made his final choice he seemed to himself to be altogether in his own. Gabriel was wonderful, but no Gabriel could assist him much henceforth.

Gabriel was indeed more wonderful than ever, while he lolled on a divan and emitted a series of reflections which were even more ingenious than opportune. Nick walked up and down the room, and it might have been supposed from his manner that he was impatient for his visitor to withdraw. This idea would have been contradicted however by the fact that subsequently, after Nash had taken leave, he continued to perambulate. He had grown used to Nash—had a sense that he had heard all he had to say. That was one's penalty with persons whose main gift was for talk, however irrigating; talk engendered a sense of sameness much sooner than action. The things a man did were necessarily more different from each other than the things he said, even if he went in for surprising you. Nick felt Nash could never surprise him any more save by doing something.

He talked of his host's future, he talked of Miriam Rooth and of Peter Sherringham, whom he had seen at Miriam Rooth's and whom he described as in a predicament delightful

to behold. Nick asked a question or two about Peter's predicament and learned rather to his disappointment that it consisted only of the fact that he was in love with Miriam. He requested his visitor to do better than this; whereupon Nash added the touch that Sherringham wouldn't be able to have her. "Oh, they have ideas!" he said, when Nick asked him why.

"What ideas? So has he, I suppose."

"Yes, but they're not the same."

"Oh well, they'll arrange something," said Nick.

"You'll have to help them a bit. She's in love with another man," Nash returned.

"Do you mean with you?"

"Oh, I'm never another man," said Nash; "I'm more the wrong one than the man himself. It's you she's after." And upon Nick's asking him what he meant by this he added: "While you were engaged in transferring her image to your sensorium you stamped your own upon hers."

Nick stopped in his walk, staring. "Ah, what a bore!"

"A bore? Don't you think she's agreeable?"

Nick hesitated. "I wanted to go on with her—now I can't."

"My dear fellow, it only makes her handsomer: I wondered what was the matter with her."

"Oh, that's twaddle," said Nick, turning away. "Besides, has she told you?"

"No, but her mother has."

"Has she told her mother?"

"Mrs. Rooth says not. But I have known Mrs. Rooth to say that which isn't."

"Apply that rule then to the information you speak of."

"Well, since you press me, I know more," said Nash. "Miriam knows you are engaged to a certain lady; she told me as much, told me she had seen her here. That was enough to set Miriam off—she likes forbidden fruit."

"I'm not engaged to any lady. I was, but we've altered our minds."

"Ah, what a pity!" sighed Nash.

"Mephistopheles!" Nick rejoined, stopping again and looking at his visitor gravely.

"Pray, whom do you call Margaret? May I ask if your failure of interest in the political situation is the cause of this change in your personal one?" Nash went on. Nick signified to him that he might not; whereupon Gabriel added: "I am not in the least devilish—I only mean it's a pity you've altered your minds, because now perhaps Miriam will alter hers. She goes from one thing to another. However, I won't tell her."

"I will, then," said Nick, between jest and earnest.

"Would that really be prudent?" Nash asked, with an intonation that made hilarity prevail.

"At any rate," Nick resumed, "nothing would induce me to interfere with Peter Sherringham. That sounds fatuous, but to you I don't mind appearing an ass."

"The thing would be to get Sherringham—out of spite—to entangle himself with another woman."

"What good would that do?"

"Oh, Miriam would begin to fancy him then."

"Spite surely isn't a conceivable motive—for a healthy man."

"Ah, Sherringham isn't a healthy man. He's too much in love."

"Then he won't care for another woman."

"He would try to, and that would produce its effect—its effect on Miriam."

"You talk like an American novel. Let him try, and God keep us all straight." Nick thought, in extreme silence, of his poor little Biddy and hoped—he would have to see to it a little—that Peter wouldn't "try" on her. He changed the subject and before Nash went away took occasion to remark to him—the occasion was offered by some new allusion of the visitor's to the sport he hoped to extract from seeing Nick carry out everything to which he stood committed—that the great comedy would fall very flat, the great incident would pass unnoticed.

"Oh, if you'll simply do your part I'll take care of the rest," said Nash.

"If you mean by doing my part working like a beaver, it's all right," Nick replied.

"Ah, you reprobate, you'll become a fashionable painter, a P. R. A.!" his companion groaned, getting up to go.

When he had gone Nick threw himself back on the cushions of the divan and, with his hands locked above his head, sat a long time lost in thought. He had sent his servant to bed; he was unmolested. He gazed before him into the gloom produced by the unheeded burning out of the last candle. The vague outer light came in through the tall studio window, and the painted images, ranged about, looked confused in the dusk. If his mother had seen him she might have thought he was staring at his father's ghost.

IV.

The night Peter Sherringham walked away from Balaklava Place with Gabriel Nash the talk of the two men directed itself, as was natural under the circumstances, to the question of Miriam's future renown and the pace, as Nash called it, at which she would go. Critical spirits as they both were, and one of them as dissimulative in passion as the other was paradoxical in the absence of it, they yet took this renown for granted as completely as the simple-minded, a pair of hot spectators in the pit, might have done, and exchanged observations on the assumption that the only uncertain element would be the pace. This was a proof of general subjugation. Peter wished not to show, but he wished to know; and in the restlessness of his anxiety he was ready even to risk exposure, great as the sacrifice might be of the imperturbable, urbane scepticism most appropriate to a secretary of embassy. He was unable to rid himself of the sense that Gabriel Nash had got up earlier than he, had had opportunities in days already distant, the days of Mrs. Rooth's hungry foreign rambles. Something of authority and privilege stuck to him from this, and it made Sherringham still more uncomfortable when he was most conscious that at the best even the trained diplomatic mind would never get a grasp of Miriam as a whole.

She was constructed to revolve like the terrestrial globe; some part or other of her was always out of sight or in shadow.

Sherringham talked to conceal his feelings and, like every man doing a thing from that sort of intention, did it perhaps too much. They agreed that, putting strange accidents aside, Miriam would go further than any one had gone, in England at least and within the memory of man; and that it was a pity, as regards marking the comparison, that for so long no one had gone any distance worth speaking of. They further agreed that it would naturally seem absurd to any one who didn't know, their prophesying such big things on such small evidence; and they agreed lastly that the absurdity quite vanished as soon as the prophets knew as *they* knew. Their knowledge (they quite recognized this) was simply confidence raised to a high point—the communication of the girl's own confidence. The conditions were enormously to make, but it was of the very essence of Miriam's confidence that she would make them. The parts, the plays, the theatres, the "support," the audiences, the critics, the money were all to be found, but she cast a spell which prevented that from seeming a serious hitch. One might not see from one day to the other what she would do or how she would do it, but she would none the less go on. She would have to construct her own road, as it were, but at the worst there would only be delays in making it. These delays would depend on the hardness of the stones she had to break.

As Sherringham had perceived, you never knew where to "have" Gabriel Nash; a truth exemplified in his unexpected delight at the prospect of Miriam's drawing forth the modern-

ness of the age. You might have thought he would loathe that modernness; but he had a brilliant, amused, amusing vision of it, saw it as something huge and ornamentally vulgar. Its vulgarity would rise to the grand style, like that of a London railway station, and Miriam's publicity would be as big as the globe itself. All the machinery was ready, the platform laid; the facilities, the wires and bells and trumpets, the colossal, deafening newspaperism of the period—its most distinctive sign—were waiting for her, their predestined mistress, to press her foot on the spring and set them all in motion. Gabriel brushed in a large bright picture of her progress through the time and round the world, round it and round it again, from continent to continent and clime to clime; with populations and deputations, reporters and photographers, placards and interviews and banquets, steamers, railways, dollars, diamonds, speeches and artistic ruin all jumbled into her train. Regardless of expense the spectacle would be and thrilling, though somewhat monotonous, the drama—a drama more bustling than any she would put on the stage and a spectacle that would beat everything for scenery. In the end her divine voice would crack, screaming to foreign ears and antipodal barbarians, and her clever manner would lose all quality, simplified to a few unmistakable knock-down dodges. Then she would be at the fine climax of life and glory, still young and insatiate, but already coarse, hard and raddled, with nothing left to do and nothing left to do it with, the remaining years all before her and the *raison d'être* all behind. It would be curious and magnificent and grotesque.

"Oh, she'll have some good years—they'll be worth having,"

Sherringham insisted, as they went. "Besides, you see her too much as a humbug and too little as a real producer. She has ideas—great ones; she loves the thing for itself. That may keep a woman serious."

"Her greatest idea must always be to show herself; and fortunately she has a splendid self to show. I think of her absolutely as a real producer, but as a producer whose production is her own person. No 'person,' even as fine a one as hers, will stand that for more than an hour, so that humbuggery has very soon to lend a hand. However," Nash continued, "if she's a fine humbug it will do as well, and perfectly suit the time. We can all be saved by vulgarity; that's the solvent of all difficulties and the blessing of this delightful age. Let no man despair; a new hope has dawned."

"She'll do her work like any other worker, with the advantage over many that her talent is rare," Peter replied. "Compared with the life of many women, that's security and sanity of the highest order. Then she can't help her beauty. You can't vulgarize that."

"Oh, can't you?" exclaimed Gabriel Nash.

"It will abide with her till the day of her death. It isn't a mere superficial freshness. She's very noble."

"Yes, that's the pity of it," said Nash. "She's a capital girl, and I quite admit that she'll do for a while a lot of good. She will have brightened up the world for a great many people; she will have brought the ideal nearer to them, held it fast for an hour, with its feet on earth and its great wings trembling. That's always something, for blessed is he who has dropped even the smallest coin into the little iron box

that contains the precious savings of mankind. Miriam will doubtless have dropped a big gold piece. It will be found, in the general scramble, on the day the race goes bankrupt. And then, for herself, she will have had a great go at life."

"Oh, yes, she'll have got out of her hole; she won't have vegetated," said Sherringham. "That makes her touching to me; it adds to the many good reasons for which one may want to help her. She's tackling a big job, and tackling it by herself; throwing herself upon the world, in good faith, and dealing with it as she can; meeting alone, in her youth, her beauty and her generosity all the embarrassments of notoriety and all the difficulties of a profession of which, if one half is what's called brilliant, the other half is odious."

"She has great courage, but should you speak of her as solitary, with such a lot of us all round her?" Gabriel asked.

"She's a great thing for you and me, but we're a small thing for her."

"Well, a good many small things may make up a considerable one," Nash returned. "There must always be the man; he's the indispensable element in such a life, and he'll be the last thing she'll ever want for."

"What man are you talking about?" Sherringham asked, rather confusedly.

"The man of the hour, whoever he is. She'll inspire innumerable devotions."

"Of course she will, and they will be precisely a part of the insufferable side of her life."

"Insufferable to whom?" Nash inquired. "Don't forget that the insufferable side of her life will be just the side she'll

thrive on. You can't eat your cake and have it, and you can't make omelettes without breaking eggs. You can't at once sit by the fire and fly about the world, and you can't go round and round the globe without having adventures. You can't be a great actress without quivering nerves. If you haven't them you'll only be a small one. If you have them, your friends will be pretty sure to hear of them. Your nerves and your adventures, your eggs and your cake, are part of the cost of the most expensive of professions. If you do your business at all you should do it handsomely, so that the costs may run up tremendously. You play with human passions, with exaltations and ecstasies and terrors, and if you trade on the fury of the elements you must know how to ride the storm."

"Those are the fine old commonplaces about the artistic temperament, but I usually find the artist a very meek, decent little person," said Sherringham.

"You never find the artist—you only find his work, and that's all you need find. When the artist's a woman and the woman's an actress, meekness and decency will doubtless be there in the right proportions," Nash went on. "Miriam will represent them for you, if you give her her starting-point, with the utmost charm."

"Of course she'll have devotions—that's all right," said Sherringham, impatiently.

"And—don't you see?—they'll mitigate her solitude, they'll even enliven it," Nash remarked.

"She'll probably box a good many ears: that'll be lively," Peter rejoined, with some grimness.

"Oh, magnificent! it will be a merry life. Yet with its

tragic passages, its distracted or its pathetic hours," Nash continued. "In short a little of everything."

The two men walked on without further speech, till at last Sherringham said: "The best thing for a woman in her situation is to marry some good fellow."

"Oh, I dare say she'll do that too!" Nash laughed; a remark in consequence of which Peter again lapsed into silence. Gabriel left him to enjoy his silence for some minutes; after which he added: "There's a good fellow she'd marry to-morrow."

Peter hesitated. "Do you mean her friend Dashwood?"

"No, no, I mean Nick Dormer."

"She'd marry him?" Sherringham asked.

"I mean her head's full of him. But she'll hardly get the chance."

"Does she like him so much as that?" Sherringham went on.

"I don't know quite how much you mean, but enough for all practical ends."

"Marrying a fashionable actress—that's hardly a practical end."

"Certainly not, but I'm not speaking from his point of view. Moreover I thought you just now said it would be such a good thing for her."

"To marry Nick Dormer?"

"You said a good fellow, and he's the very best."

"I wasn't thinking of the man, but of the marriage. It would protect her, make things safe and comfortable for her and keep a lot of cads and blackguards away."

"She ought to marry the prompter or the box-keeper," said Nash. "Then it would be all right. I think indeed they generally do, don't they?"

Sherringham felt for a moment a strong disposition to drop his companion on the spot—to cross to the other side of the street and walk away without him. But there was a different impulse which struggled with this one and, after a minute, overcame it—the impulse which led to his saying presently: "Has she told you that—that she's in love with Nick?"

"No, no—that's not the way I know it."

"Has Nick told you, then?"

"On the contrary, I've told him."

"You've rendered him a questionable service if you've no proof," said Peter.

"My proof is only that I've seen her with him. She's charming, poor thing."

"But surely she isn't in love with every man she's charming to."

"I mean she's charming to me," Nash replied. "I see her that way. But judge for yourself—the first time you get a chance."

"When shall I get a chance? Nick doesn't come near her."

"Oh, he'll come, he'll come; his picture isn't finished."

"You mean *he'll* be the box-keeper then?"

"My dear fellow, I shall never allow it," said Gabriel Nash. "It would be idiotic and quite unnecessary. He's beautifully arranged, in quite a different line. Fancy his taking that sort of job on his hands! Besides, she would never

expect it; she's not such a goose. They're very good friends —it will go on that way. She's an excellent sort of woman for him to know; she'll give him lots of ideas of the plastic kind. He would have been up there before this, but he has been absorbed in this delightful squabble with his constituents. That of course is pure amusement; but when once it's well launched he'll get back to business and his business will be a very different matter from Miriam's. Imagine him writing her advertisements, living on her money, adding up her profits, having rows and recriminations with her agent, carrying her shawl, spending his days in her rouge-pot. The right man for that, if she must have one, will turn up. '*Pour le mariage, non.*' Miriam isn't an idiot; she really, for a woman, quite sees things as they are."

As Sherringham had not crossed the street and left Gabriel planted, he was obliged to brave the torment of this suggestive flow. But descrying in the dusky vista of the Edgware Road a vague and vigilant hansom, he waved his stick with eagerness and with the abrupt declaration that he was tired, must drive the rest of the way. He offered Nash, as he entered the vehicle, no seat, but this coldness was not reflected in the lucidity with which that master of every subject went on to affirm that there was, of course, a danger—the danger that in given circumstances Miriam would leave the stage.

"Leave it you mean for some man?"

"For the man we're talking about."

"For Nick Dormer?" Peter asked from his place in the cab, his paleness lighted by its lamps.

"If he should make it a condition. But why should he—

why should he make *any* conditions? He's not an ass either. You see it would be a bore," Nash continued while the hansom waited, "because if she were to do anything of that sort she would make him pay for the sacrifice."

"Oh yes, she'd make him pay for the sacrifice," Sherringham repeated.

"And then, when he had paid, she'd go back to her footlights," Gabriel added, explicatively, from the curbstone, as Sherringham closed the apron of the cab.

"I see—she'd go back—good-night," Peter replied. "*Please* go on!" he cried to the driver through the hole in the roof. And when the vehicle rolled away he subjoined to himself: "Of course she would—and quite right!"

V.

"JUDGE for yourself when you get a chance," Nash had said; and as it turned out Sherringham was able to judge two days later, for he found his cousin in Balaklava Place on the Tuesday following his walk with Gabriel. He had not only stayed away from the theatre on the Monday evening (he regarded this as an achievement of some importance), but had not been near Miriam during the day. He had meant to absent himself from her company on Tuesday as well; a determination confirmed by the fact that the afternoon turned out wet. But when, at ten minutes to five o'clock, he jumped into a hansom and directed its course to St. John's Wood, it was precisely upon the weather that he shifted the responsibility of his behaviour.

Miriam had dined when he reached the villa, but she was lying down—she was tired—before going to the theatre. Mrs. Rooth was however in the drawing-room with three gentlemen, in two of whom the fourth visitor was not startled to recognize Basil Dashwood and Gabriel Nash. Dashwood appeared to have become Miriam's brother-in-arms and a second child—a fonder one—to Mrs. Rooth; it had come to Sherringham's knowledge the last time he was in Balaklava Place that the young actor had finally moved his lodgings

into the quarter, making himself a near neighbour for all sorts of convenience. "Hang his convenience!" Peter thought, perceiving that Mrs. Lovick's "Arty" was now altogether one of the family. Oh, the family—it was a queer one to be connected with; that consciousness was acute in Sherringham's breast to-day as he entered Mrs. Rooth's little circle. The room was filled with cigarette-smoke and there was a messy coffee-service on the piano, whose keys Basil Dashwood lightly touched for his own diversion. Nash, addressing the room, of course, was at one end of a little sofa, with his nose in the air, and Nick Dormer was at the other end, seated much at his ease, with a certain privileged appearance of having been there often before, though Sherringham knew he had not. He looked uncritical and very young, as rosy as a school-boy on a half-holiday. It was past five o'clock in the day, but Mrs. Rooth was not dressed; there was however no want of finish in her elegant attitude—the same relaxed grandeur (she seemed to let you understand) for which she used to be distinguished at Castle Nugent when the house was full. She toyed incongruously, in her unbuttoned wrapper, with a large tinsel fan which resembled a theatrical property.

It was one of the discomforts of Sherringham's situation that many of those minor matters which are, superficially at least, most characteristic of the histrionic life had power to displease him, so that he was obliged to make the effort of indulgence. He disliked besmoked drawing-rooms and irregular meals and untidy arrangements; he could suffer from the vulgarity of Mrs. Rooth's apartments, the importunate photographs (they gave on his nerves), the barbarous absence of

signs of an orderly domestic life, the odd volumes from the circulating library (you could see what they were—the very covers told you—at a glance) tumbled about with cups or glasses on them. He had not waited till now to make the reflection that it was a strange thing fate should have goaded *him* into that sort of contact; but as he stood before Mrs. Rooth and her companions he made it perhaps more pointedly than ever. Her companions, somehow, who were not responsible, didn't keep him from making it; which was particularly odd, as they were not, superficially, in the least of Bohemian type. Almost the first thing that struck him, as it happened, in coming into the room, was the essential good looks of his cousin, who was a gentleman to the eye in a different degree from the high-collared Dashwood. Peter didn't hate him for being such a pleasant young Englishman; his consciousness was traversed rather by a fresh wave of annoyance at Julia's failure to get on with him on that substantial basis.

It was Sherringham's first encounter with Nick since his arrival in London: they had been, on one side and the other, so much taken up with their own affairs. Since their last meeting Nick had, as we know, to his kinsman's perception, really taken on a new character: he had done a fine stroke of business in a quiet way. This made him a figure to be counted with, and in just the sense in which Peter desired least to count with him. Poor Sherringham, after his summersault in the blue, was much troubled these last days; he was ravaged by contending passions; he paid, every hour, in a torment of unrest, for what was false in his position, the impossibility of

being consistent, the opposition of interest and desire. Nick, his junior and a lighter weight, had settled *his* problem and showed no wounds: there was something impertinent and mystifying in it. He looked too innocently young and happy there, and too careless and modest and amateurish for a rival or for the genius that he was apparently going to try to be—the genius that, the other day in the studio with Biddy, Peter had got a startled glimpse of his capacity for being. Sherringham would have liked to feel that he had grounds of resentment, that Julia had been badly treated or that Nick was fatuous, for in that case he might have regarded him as offensive. But where was the offence of his merely being liked by a woman in respect to whom Peter had definitely denied himself the luxury of pretensions, especially if the offender had taken no action in the matter? It could scarcely be called culpable action to call, casually, on an afternoon when the lady was invisible. Peter, at any rate, was distinctly glad Miriam was invisible; and he proposed to himself to suggest to Nick after a little that they should adjourn together—they had such interesting things to talk about. Meanwhile Nick greeted him with candid tones and pleasant eyes, in which he could read neither confusion nor defiance. Sherringham was reassured against a danger he believed he didn't recognize and puzzled by a mystery he flattered himself he didn't mind. And he was still more ashamed of being reassured than of being puzzled.

It must be recorded that Miriam remained invisible only a few minutes longer. Nick, as Sherringham gathered, had been about a quarter of an hour in the house, which would

have given the girl, aroused from her repose, about time to array herself to come down to him. At all events she was in the room, prepared apparently to go to the theatre, very shortly after Sherringham had become sensible of how glad he was she was out of it. Familiarity had never yet cured him of a certain tremor of expectation and even of suspense in regard to her entrances; a flutter caused by the simple circumstance of her infinite variety. To say she was always acting suggests too much that she was often fatiguing; for her changing face affected this particular admirer at least not as a series of masks, but as a response to perceived differences, an intensity of sensibility, or still more as something cleverly constructive, like the shifting of the scene in a play or a room with many windows. Her incarnations were incalculable, but if her present denied her past and declined responsibility for her future, it made a good thing of the hour and kept the actual very actual. This time the actual was a bright, gentle, graceful, smiling young woman in a new dress, eager to go out, drawing on fresh gloves, who looked as if she were about to step into a carriage and (it was Gabriel Nash who thus formulated her physiognomy) do a lot of London things.

The young woman had time to spare however, and she sat down and talked and laughed and presently gave, as it seemed to Sherringham, a finer character to the tawdry little room. It was honourable enough if it belonged to her. She described herself as in a state of nervous bewilderment—exhausted, stupefied, blinded with the rehearsals of the forthcoming piece (the first night was close at hand and it was going to be *d'un mauvais*—they would all see!), but there was no corre-

spondence between this account of the matter and her present kindly gaiety. She sent her mother away—to "put on some clothes or something"—and, left alone with the visitors, went to a long glass between the windows, talking always to Nick Dormer, and revised and rearranged a little her own attire. She talked to Nick over her shoulder, and to Nick only, as if he were the guest to recognize and the others didn't count. She broke out immediately about his having thrown up his seat, wished to know if the strange story told her by Mr. Nash were true—that he had knocked all the hopes of his party into pie.

Nick took it in this way and gave a jocular picture of his party's ruin, the critical condition of public affairs: evidently as yet he remained inaccessible to shame or repentance. Sherringham, before Miriam's entrance, had not, in shaking hands with Nick, made even a roundabout allusion to his odd "game:" there seemed a sort of muddled good taste in being silent about it. He winced a little on seeing how his scruples had been wasted, and was struck with the fine, jocose, direct turn of his kinsman's conversation with the young actress. It was a part of her unexpectedness that she took the heavy literal view of Nick's behaviour; declared frankly, though without ill-nature, that she had no patience with his folly. She was horribly disappointed—she had set her heart on his being a great statesman, one of the rulers of the people and the glories of England. What was so useful, what was so noble?—how it belittled everything else! She had expected him to wear a cordon and a star some day (and to get them very soon), and to come and see her in her *loge:* it would

look so well. She talked like a lovely Philistine, except perhaps when she expressed surprise at hearing—she heard it from Gabriel Nash—that in England gentlemen accoutred with those emblems of their sovereign's esteem didn't so far forget themselves as to stray into the dressing-rooms of actresses. She admitted, after a moment, that they were quite right—the dressing-rooms of actresses were nasty places; but she was sorry, for that was the sort of thing she had always figured, in a corner—a distinguished man, slightly bald, in evening dress, with orders, admiring the smallness of a satin shoe and saying witty things. Gabriel Nash was convulsed with hilarity at this—such a vision of the British political hero. Coming back from the glass and making him give her his place on the sofa, she seated herself near Nick and continued to express her regret at his perversity.

"They all say that—all the charming women, but I shouldn't have looked for it from you," Nick replied. "I've given you such an example of what I can do in another line."

"Do you mean my portrait? Oh, I've got it, with your name and 'M.P.' in the corner, and that's precisely why I'm content. 'M.P.' in the corner of a picture is delightful, but I want to break the mould: I don't in the least insist on your giving specimens to others. And the artistic life, when you can lead another—if you have any alternative, however modest—is a very poor business. It comes last in dignity—after everything else. Ain't I up to my eyes in it and don't I know?"

"You talk like my broken-hearted mother," said Nick.

"Does she hate it so intensely?"

"She has the darkest ideas about it—the wildest theories. I can't imagine where she gets them; partly, I think, from a general conviction that the 'æsthetic'—a horrible insidious foreign disease—is eating the healthy core out of English life (dear old English life!) and partly from the charming drawings in *Punch* and the clever satirical articles, pointing at mysterious depths of contamination, in the other weekly papers. She believes there's a dreadful coterie of uncannily clever and desperately refined people, who wear a kind of loose, faded uniform and worship only beauty—which is a fearful thing—that Nash has introduced me to it, that I now spend all my time in it, and that for its sweet sake I have repudiated the most sacred engagements. Poor Nash, who, so far as I can make out, isn't in any sort of society, however bad!"

"But I'm uncannily clever," Nash interposed, "and though I can't afford the uniform (I believe you get it best somewhere in South Audley Street), I do worship beauty. I really think it's me the weekly paper means."

"Oh, I've read the articles—I know the sort!" said Basil Dashwood.

Miriam looked at him. "Go and see if the brougham's there—I ordered it early."

Dashwood, without moving, consulted his watch. "It isn't time yet—I know more about the brougham than you. I've made a rattling good arrangement for her—it really costs her nothing," the young actor continued confidentially to Sherringham, near whom he had placed himself.

"Your mother's quite right to be broken-hearted," Miriam declared, "and I can imagine exactly what she has been through. I should like to talk with her—I should like to see her." Nick broke into ringing laughter, reminding her that she had talked to him, while she sat for her portrait, in directly the opposite sense, most suggestively and inspiringly; and Nash explained that she was studying the part of a political duchess and wished to take observations for it, to work herself into the character. Miriam might in fact have been a political duchess as she sat with her head erect and her gloved hands folded, smiling with aristocratic dimness at Nick. She shook her head with stately sadness; she might have been representing Mary Stuart in Schiller's play. "I've changed since that. I want you to be the grandest thing there is—the counsellor of kings."

Peter Sherringham wondered if possibly it were not since she had met his sister in Nick's studio that she had changed, if perhaps it had not occurred to her that it would give Julia the sense of being more effectually routed to know that the woman who had thrown the bomb was one who also tried to keep Nick in the straight path. This indeed would involve an assumption that Julia might know, whereas it was perfectly possible that she mightn't and more than possible that if she should she wouldn't care. Miriam's essential fondness for trying different ways was always there as an adequate reason for any particular way; a truth which however sometimes only half prevented the particular way from being vexatious to Sherringham.

"Yet after all who is more æsthetic than you and who

goes in more for the beautiful?" Nick asked. "You're never so beautiful as when you pitch into it."

"Oh, I'm an inferior creature, of an inferior sex, and I have to earn my bread as I can. I'd give it all up in a moment, my odious trade—for an inducement."

"And pray what do you mean by an inducement?" Nick demanded.

"My dear fellow, she means you—if you'll give her a permanent engagement to sit for you!" exclaimed Gabriel Nash. "What crude questions you ask!"

"I like the way she talks," Basil Dashwood broke in, "when I gave up the most brilliant prospects, of very much the same kind as Mr. Dormer's, expressly to go on the stage."

"You're an inferior creature too," said Miriam.

"Miss Rooth is very hard to satisfy," Sherringham observed. "A man of distinction, slightly bald, in evening dress, with orders, in the corner of her *loge*—she has such a personage ready made to her hand and she doesn't so much as look at him. Am I not an inducement? Have I not offered you a permanent engagement?"

"Your orders—where are your orders?" Miriam inquired with a sweet smile, getting up.

"I shall be a minister next year and an ambassador before you know it. Then I shall stick on everything that can be had."

"And they call *us* mountebanks!" cried the girl. "I've been so glad to see you again—do you want another sitting?" she went on, to Nick, as if to take leave of him.

"As many as you'll give me—I shall be grateful for all," Nick answered. "I should like to do you as you are at

present. You're totally different from the woman I painted —you're wonderful."

"The Comic Muse!" laughed Miriam. "Well, you must wait till our first nights are over—I'm *sur les dents* till then. There's everything to do, and I have to do it all. That fellow's good for nothing—for nothing but domestic life," and she glanced at Basil Dashwood. "He hasn't an idea—not one that you'd willingly tell of him, though he's rather useful for the stables. We've got stables now—or we try to look as if we had: Dashwood's ideas are *de cette force.* In ten days I shall have more time."

"The Comic Muse? Never, never," Sherringham protested. "You're not to go smirking through the age and down to posterity—I'd rather see you as Medusa crowned with serpents. That's what you look like when you look best."

"That's consoling—when I've just bought a new bonnet! I forgot to tell you just now that when you're an ambassador you may propose anything you like," Miriam went on. "But excuse me if I make that condition. Seriously speaking, come to me glittering with orders and I shall probably succumb. I can't resist stars and garters. Only you must, as you say' have them all. I *don't* like to hear Mr. Dormer talk the slang of the studio—like that phrase just now: it *is* a fall to a lower state. However, when one is low one must crawl, and I'm crawling down to the Strand. Dashwood, see if mamma's ready. If she isn't I decline to wait; you must bring her in a hansom. I'll take Mr. Dormer in the brougham; I want to talk with Mr. Dormer; he must drive with me to the theatre. His situation is full of interest." Miriam led the way out of

the room as she continued to chatter, and when she reached the house-door, with the four men in her train, the carriage had just drawn up at the garden-gate. It appeared that Mrs. Rooth was not ready, and the girl, in spite of a remonstrance from Nick, who had the sense of usurping the old lady's place, repeated her injunction that she should be brought on in a cab. Miriam's companions accompanied her to the gate, and she insisted upon Nick's taking his seat in the brougham and taking it first. Before she entered she put out her hand to Sherringham and, looking up at him, held his own kindly. "Dear old master, aren't you coming to-night? I miss you when you're not there."

"Don't go—don't go—it's too much," Nash interposed.

"She *is* wonderful," said Basil Dashwood, regarding her admiringly; "she *has* gone into the rehearsals, tooth and nail. But nothing takes it out of her."

"Nothing puts it into you, my dear!" Miriam returned. Then she went on, to Sherringham: "You're the faithful one—you're the one I count on." He was not looking at her; his eyes travelled into the carriage, where they rested on Nick Dormer, established on the further seat with his face turned toward the further window. He was the one, faithful or no, counted on or no, whom a charming woman had preferred to carry off, and there was a certain triumph for him in that fact; but it pleased Sherringham to imagine that his attitude was a little foolish. Miriam discovered something of this sort in Sherringham's eyes; for she exclaimed abruptly: "Don't kill him—he doesn't care for me!" With this she passed into the carriage, which rolled away.

Sherringham stood watching it a moment, till he heard Basil Dashwood again beside him. "You wouldn't believe what I made him do it for—a little fellow I know."

"Good-bye; take good care of Mrs. Rooth," said Gabriel Nash, waving a cheerful farewell to the young actor. He gave a smiling survey of the heavens and remarked to Sherringham that the rain had stopped. Was he walking, was he driving, should they be going in the same direction? Sherringham cared little about his direction and had little account of it to give; he simply moved away in silence, with Gabriel at his side. Gabriel was partly an affliction to him; indeed the fact that he had assumed a baleful fascination made him only a deeper affliction. Sherringham moreover did him the justice to observe that he could hold his peace occasionally: he had for instance this afternoon taken little part in the conversation in Balaklava Place. Peter greatly disliked to talk to him of Miriam, but he liked Nash to talk of her and he even liked him to say such things as he might contradict. He was not however moved to contradict an assertion dropped by his companion, disconnectedly, at the end of a few minutes, to the effect that she was after all the most good-natured creature alive. All the same, Nash added, it wouldn't do for her to take possession of an organization like Nick's; and he repeated that for his part he would never allow it. It would be on his conscience to interfere. To which Sherringham replied disingenuously that they might all do as they liked—it didn't matter a button to *him*. And with an effort to carry off that comedy he changed the subject.

VI.

Peter Sherringham would not for a moment have admitted that he was jealous of Nick Dormer, but he would almost have liked to be accused of it; for this would have given him an opportunity to declare with plausibility that so uncomfortable a passion had no application to his case. How could a man be jealous when he was not a suitor? how could he pretend to guard a property which was neither his own nor destined to become his own? There could be no question of loss when one had nothing at stake and no question of envy when the responsibility of possession was exactly what one prayed to be delivered from. The measure of one's susceptibility was one's pretensions, and Peter was not only ready to declare over and over again that, thank God, he had none: his spiritual detachment was still more complete—he literally suffered from the fact that the declaration was but little elicited. He connected an idea of virtue and honour with his attitude; for surely it was a high example of conduct to have quenched a personal passion for the sake of the public service. He had gone over the whole question at odd, irrepressible hours; he had returned, spiritually speaking, the buffet administered to him in a moment, that day in Rosedale Road, by the spectacle of the *crânerie* with which Nick could let

worldly glories slide. Resolution for resolution he preferred after all another sort, and his own crânerie would be shown in the way he should stick to his profession and stand up for British interests. If Nick had leaped over a wall he would leap over a river. The course of his river was already traced and his loins were already girded. Thus he was justified in holding that the measure of a man's susceptibility was a man's attitude: that was the only thing he was bound to give an account of.

He was perpetually giving an account of it to his own soul, in default of other listeners. He was quite angry at having tasted a sweetness in Miriam's assurance, at the carriage door, bestowed indeed with very little solemnity, that Nick didn't care for her. Wherein did it concern him that Nick cared for her or that Nick didn't? Wherein did it signify to him that Gabriel Nash should have taken upon himself to disapprove of a union between the young actress and the young painter and to frustrate an accident that might perhaps be happy? For those had also been cooling words at the hour, though Peter blushed on the morrow to think that he had perceived in them anything but Nash's personal sublimity. He was ashamed of having been refreshed, and refreshed by so sickly a draught, because it was his theory that he was not in a fever. As for keeping an eye on Nick, it would soon become clear to that young man and that young man's charming friend that he had quite other uses for his sharpness. Nick and Miriam and Gabriel Nash could straighten out their complications according to their light. He would never speak to Nick of Miriam; he felt indeed just now as if he should never

speak to Nick of anything. He had traced the course of his river, as I say, and the real proof would be the way he should fly through the air. It was a case for action—for vigorous, unmistakable action. He had done very little since his arrival in London but moon round a *fille de théâtre* who was taken up partly, though she bluffed it off, with another man and partly with arranging new petticoats for a beastly old "poetic drama;" but this little waste of time should instantly be made up. He had given himself a certain rope and he had danced to the end of his rope, and now he would dance back. That was all right—so right that Sherringham could only express to himself how right it was by whistling gaily.

He whistled as he went to dine with a great personage, the day after his meeting with Nick in Balaklava Place; a great personage to whom he had originally paid his respects—it was high time—the day before that meeting, the Monday previous. The sense of omissions to repair, of a superior line to take, perhaps made him study with more intensity to please the personage, who gave him ten minutes and asked him five questions. A great many doors were successively opened before any palpitating pilgrim who was about to enter the presence of this distinguished man; but they were discreetly closed again behind Sherringham, and I must ask the reader to pause with me at the nearer end of the momentary vista. This particular pilgrim fortunately felt that he could count upon being recognized not only as a faithful if obscure official in the great hierarchy, but as a clever young man who happened to be connected by blood with people his lordship had intimately known. No doubt it was simply as the clever

young man that Peter received the next morning from the dispenser of his lordship's hospitality a note asking him to dine on the morrow. He had received such cards before and he always responded to the invitation: he did so however on the present occasion with a sense of unusual intention. In due course his intention was translated into words: before the gentlemen left the dining-room he took the liberty of asking his noble host if during the next few days there would be three minutes more that he might, in his extreme benevolence, bestow upon him.

"What is it you want? Tell me now," the master of his fate replied, motioning to the rest of the company to pass out and detaining Peter in the dining-room.

Peter's excellent training covered every contingency: he could be concise or diffuse, as the occasion required. Even he himself however was surprised at the quick felicity of the terms in which he was conscious of conveying that if it were compatible with higher conveniences he should peculiarly like to be transferred to duties in a more distant quarter of the globe. Indeed though Sherringham was fond of thinking of himself as a man of emotions controlled by training, it is not impossible that there was a greater candour than he knew in the expression of his face and even the slight tremor of his voice as he presented this petition. He had wished extremely that his manner should be good in doing so, but perhaps the best part of it for his interlocutor was just the part in which it failed—in which it confessed a secret that the highest diplomacy would not have confessed. Sherringham remarked to the minister that he didn't care in the least where the

place might be, nor how little coveted a post; the further away the better and the climate didn't matter. He would only prefer of course that there should be really something to do, although he would make the best of it even if there were not. He stopped in time, or at least he thought he did, not to appear to suggest that he covertly sought relief from the misery of a hindered passion in a flight to latitudes unfavourable to human life. His august patron gave him a sharp look which, for a moment, seemed the precursor of a sharper question; but the moment elapsed and the question did not come. This considerate omission, characteristic of a true man of the world and representing quick guesses and still quicker indifferences, made Sherringham from that moment his lordship's ardent partisan. What did come was a good-natured laugh and the exclamation: "You know there are plenty of swamps and jungles, if you want that sort of thing." Sherringham replied that it was very much that sort of thing he did want; whereupon his interlocutor continued: "I'll see—I'll see; if anything turns up, you shall hear."

Something turned up the very next day: our young man, taken at his word, found himself indebted to the post for a large, stiff, engraved official letter, in which the high position of minister to the smallest of Central American republics was offered to him. The republic, though small, was big enough to be "shaky," and the position, though high, was not so exalted that there were not much greater altitudes above it to which it was a stepping-stone. Sherringham took one thing with another, rejoiced at his easy triumph, reflected that he must have been even more noticed at headquarters than he

had hoped, and, on the spot, consulting nobody and waiting for nothing, signified his unqualified acceptance of the place. Nobody with a grain of sense would have advised him to do anything else. It made him happier than he had supposed he should ever be again; it made him feel professionally in the train, as they said in Paris; it was serious, it was interesting, it was exciting, and Sherringham's imagination, letting itself loose into the future, began once more to scale the crowning heights. It was very simple to hold one's course if one really tried, and he blessed shaky republics. A further communication informed him that he would be expected to return to Paris for a short interval a week later and that he would before that time be advised of the date at which he was to proceed to his remoter duties.

VII.

The first thing Peter now did was to go and see Lady Agnes Dormer; it is not unworthy of note that he took on the other hand no step to make his promotion known to Miriam Rooth. To render it more probable he should find her he went at the luncheon-hour; and she was indeed on the point of sitting down to that repast with Grace. Biddy was not at home—Biddy was never at home now, her mother said: she was always at Nick's place, she spent her life there, she ate and drank there, she almost slept there. What she found to do there in so many hours, or what was the irresistible spell, Lady Agnes could not pretend that she had succeeded in discovering. She spoke of this baleful resort only as "Nick's place," and she spoke of it at first as little as possible. She thought it very probable however that Biddy would come in early that afternoon: there was something or other, some common social duty, that she had condescended to promise she would perform with Grace. Poor Lady Agnes, whom Sherringham found in a very grim yet very tremulous condition (she assured her visitor her nerves were all gone), almost abused her younger daughter for two minutes, having evidently a deep-seated need of abusing some one. I must add however that she didn't wait to meet Grace's eye before

recovering, by a rapid gyration, her view of the possibilities of things—those possibilities from which she still might squeeze, as a mother, the drop that would sweeten her cup. "Dear child," she had the presence of mind to add, "her only fault is after all that she adores her brother. She has a capacity for adoration and must always take her gospel from some one."

Grace declared to Peter that her sister would have stayed at home if she had dreamed he was coming, and Lady Agnes let him know that she had heard all about the hour he had spent with the poor child at Nick's place and about his extraordinary good-nature in taking the two girls to the play. Peter lunched in Calcutta Gardens, spending an hour there which proved at first unexpectedly and, as it seemed to him, unfairly dismal. He knew from his own general perceptions, from what Biddy had told him and from what he had heard Nick say in Balaklava Place, that Lady Agnes would have been wounded by her son's apostasy; but it was not till he saw her that he appreciated the dark difference this young man's behaviour had made in the outlook of his family. Evidently that behaviour had, as he phrased it, pulled the bottom out of innumerable private calculations. These were things that no outsider could measure and they were none of an outsider's business; it was enough that Lady Agnes struck him really as a woman who had received her death-blow. She looked ten years older; she was white and haggard and tragic. Her eyes burned with a strange intermittent fire which made him say to himself that her children had better look out for her. When they were not filled with this

unnatural flame they were suffused with comfortless tears; and altogether the afflicted lady was very bad—very bad indeed. It was because he had known she would be very bad that he had in his kindness called upon her in exactly this manner; but he recognized that to undertake to be kind to her in proportion to her need might carry one very far. He was glad he himself had not a wronged, mad mother, and he wondered how Nick Dormer could endure the home he had ruined. Apparently he didn't endure it very much, but had taken definitive and highly convenient refuge in Rosedale Road.

Peter's judgment of his young kinsman was considerably confused, and a sensible element in it was the consciousness that he was perhaps just now not in the best state of mind for judging him at all. At the same time, though he held in general that an intelligent man has a legible warrant for doing the particular thing he prefers, he could scarcely help asking himself whether in the exercise of a virile freedom it had been absolutely indispensable that Nick should work such domestic woe. He admitted indeed that this was an anomalous vision of Nick, as the worker of domestic woe. Then he saw that Lady Agnes's grievance (there came a moment, later, when she asserted as much) was not quite what Nick, in Balaklava Place, had represented it—with questionable taste perhaps—to a mocking actress; was not a mere shocked quarrel with his adoption of a "low" career, or a horror, the old-fashioned horror, of the strange licenses taken by artists under pretext of being conscientious: the day for this was past and English society thought the brush

and the fiddle as good as anything else, with two or three exceptions. It was not what he had taken up but what he had put down that made the sorry difference, and the tragedy would have been equally great if he had become a wine-merchant or a horse-dealer. Peter had gathered at first that Lady Agnes would not trust herself to speak directly of her trouble, and he obeyed what he supposed to be the best discretion in making no allusion to it. But a few minutes before they rose from luncheon she broke out, and when he attempted to utter a word of mitigation there was something that went to his heart in the way she returned: "Oh, you don't know—you don't know!"

He perceived Grace's eyes fixed upon him at this instant with a look of supplication, and he was uncertain as to what she wanted—that he should say something more to console her mother or should hurry away from the subject. Grace looked old and plain and (he had thought, on coming in) rather cross, but she evidently wanted something. "You don't know," Lady Agnes repeated, with a trembling voice—"you don't know." She had pushed her chair a little away from the table; she held her pocket-handkerchief pressed hard to her mouth, almost stuffed into it, and her eyes were fixed on the floor. She made him feel as if he did know—knew what towering piles of confidence and hope had been dashed to the earth. Then Lady Agnes finished her sentence unexpectedly: "You don't know what my life with my husband was." Here, on the other hand, Peter was slightly at fault—he didn't exactly see what her life with her husband had to do with it. What was clear to him however was that they

literally had looked for the very greatest things from Nick. It was not quite easy to see why this had been the case—it had not been precisely Sherringham's own prefigurement. Nick appeared to have had the faculty of communicating that sort of faith to women; he had originally given Julia a tremendous dose of it, though she had since shaken off the effects.

"Do you really think he would have done such great things, politically speaking?" Peter inquired. "Do you consider that the root of the matter was in him?"

Lady Agnes hesitated a moment, looking rather hard at her visitor. "I only think what all his friends—all his father's friends—have thought. He was his father's son, after all. No young man ever had a finer training, and he gave, from the first, repeated proof of having the highest sort of ability, the highest sort of ambition. See how he got in everywhere. Look at his first seat—look at his second," Lady Agnes continued. "Look at what every one says at this moment."

"Look at all the papers!" said Grace. "Did you ever hear him speak?" she asked. And when Peter reminded her that he had spent his life in foreign lands she went on: "Well, you lost something."

"It was very charming," said Lady Agnes quietly.

"Of course he's charming, whatever he does," Peter conceded. "He'll be a charming artist."

"Oh, heaven!" groaned Lady Agnes, rising quickly.

"He won't—that's the worst," Grace amended. "It isn't as if he'd do things people would like. I've been to his place

and I never saw such a horrid lot of things—not at all clever or pretty."

"You know nothing whatever about the matter!" Lady Agnes exclaimed, with unexpected asperity. Then she added, to Peter, that, as it happened, her children did have a good deal of artistic taste: Grace was the only one who was totally deficient in it. Biddy was very clever—Biddy really might learn to do pretty things. And anything the poor child could learn was now no more than her duty—there was so little knowing what the future had in store for them all.

"You think too much of the future—you take terribly gloomy views," said Peter, looking for his hat.

"What other views can one take, when one's son has deliberately thrown away a fortune?"

"Thrown one away? Do you mean through not marrying—?"

"I mean through killing by his perversity the best friend he ever had."

Sherringham stared a moment; then with laughter: "Ah, but Julia isn't dead of it?"

"I'm not talking of Julia," said Lady Agnes, with a good deal of majesty. "Nick isn't mercenary, and I'm not complaining of that."

"She means Mr. Carteret," Grace explained. "He would have done anything if Nick had stayed in the House."

"But he's not dead?"

"Charles Carteret is dying," said Lady Agnes—"his end is very, very near. He has been a sort of providence to us—he was Sir Nicholas's second self. But he won't stand such nonsense, and that chapter's closed."

"You mean he has dropped Nick out of his will?"

"Cut him off utterly. He has given him notice."

"The old scoundrel! But Nick will work the better for that—he'll depend on himself."

"Yes, and whom shall *we* depend on?" Grace demanded.

"Don't be vulgar, for God's sake!" her mother ejaculated with a certain inconsequence.

"Oh, leave Nick alone—he'll make a lot of money," Peter declared cheerfully, following his two companions into the hall.

"I don't in the least care whether he does or not," said Lady Agnes. "You must come up-stairs again—I've lots to say to you yet," she went on, seeing that Peter had taken his hat. "You must arrange to come and dine with us immediately; it's only because I've been so steeped in misery that I didn't write to you the other day—directly after you called. We don't give parties, as you may imagine, but if you'll come just as we are, for old acquaintance' sake—"

"Just with Nick—if Nick will come—and dear Biddy," Grace interposed.

"Nick must certainly come, as well as dear Biddy, whom I hoped so much to find," Peter rejoined. "Because I'm going away—I don't know when I shall see them again."

"Wait with mamma. Biddy will come in at any moment," Grace urged.

"You're going away?" asked Lady Agnes, pausing at the foot of the stairs and turning her white face upon him. Something in the tone of her voice showed that she had been struck by his own tone.

"I have had promotion, and you must congratulate me.

They are sending me out as minister to a little hot hole in Central America—five thousand miles away. I shall have to go rather soon."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Lady Agnes breathed. Still she paused at the foot of the stair and still she gazed.

"How very delightful, because it will lead, straight off, to all sorts of other good things!" Grace exclaimed.

"Oh, I'm crawling up, and I'm an excellency," Peter laughed.

"Then if you dine with us your excellency must have great people to meet you."

"Nick and Biddy—they're great enough."

"Come up-stairs—come up-stairs," said Lady Agnes, turning quickly and beginning to ascend.

"Wait for Biddy—I'm going out," Grace continued, extending her hand to her kinsman. "I shall see you again—not that you care; but good-bye now. Wait for Biddy," the girl repeated in a lower tone, fastening her eyes on his with the same urgent, mystifying gleam that he thought he had perceived in them at luncheon.

"Oh, I'll go and see her in Rosedale Road," he answered.

"Do you mean to-day—now?"

"I don't know about to-day, but before I leave England."

"Well, she'll be in immediately," said Grace. "Good-bye to your excellency."

"Come up, Peter—*please* come up," called Lady Agnes, from the top of the stairs.

He mounted, and when he found himself in the drawing-room with her, with the door closed, she told him that she

was exceedingly interested in his fine prospects, that she wished to hear all about his new position. She rang for coffee and indicated the seat he would find most comfortable: he had for a moment an apprehension that she would tell him he might if he liked light a cigar. For Peter Sherringham had suddenly become restless—too restless to occupy a comfortable chair; he seated himself in it only to jump up again, and he went to the window—while he communicated to his hostess the very little that he knew about his prospective post—on hearing a vehicle drive up to the door. A strong light had just been thrown into his mind, and it seemed to grow stronger when, looking out of the window, he saw Grace Dormer issue from the house in a bonnet and jacket which had all the air of having been assumed with extraordinary speed. Her jacket was unbuttoned, her gloves were dangling from her hand and she was tying her bonnet-strings. The vehicle into which she hastily sprang was a hansom-cab which had been summoned by the butler from the doorstep and which rolled away with her after she had given the cabman an address.

"Where is Grace going in such a hurry?" he asked of Lady Agnes; to which she replied that she had not the least idea—her children, at the pass they had all come to, knocked about as they liked.

Peter sat down again; he stayed a quarter of an hour and then he stayed longer, and during this time his appreciation of what Lady Agnes had in her mind gathered force. She showed him clearly enough what she had in her mind, although she showed it by no clumsy nor reprehensible overtures. It

looked out of her sombre, conscious eyes and quavered in her preoccupied, perfunctory tones. She manifested an extravagant interest in his future proceedings, the probable succession of events in his career, the different honours he would be likely to come in for, the salary attached to his actual appointment, the salary attached to the appointments that would follow—they would be sure to, wouldn't they?—and what he might reasonably expect to save. Oh, he must save—Lady Agnes was an advocate of saving; and he must take tremendous pains and get on and be clever and ambitious: he must make himself indispensable and rise to the top. She was urgent and suggestive and sympathetic; she threw herself into the vision of his achievements and emoluments as if to satisfy a little the sore hunger with which Nick's treachery had left her. This was touching to Peter Sherringham, and he did not remain unmoved even at those more importunate moments when, as she fell into silence, fidgeting feverishly with a morsel of fancy-work that she had plucked from a table, her whole presence became an intense repressed appeal to him. What that appeal would have been had it been uttered was: "Oh, Peter, take little Biddy; oh, my dear young friend, understand your interests at the same time that you understand mine; be kind and reasonable and clever; save me all further anxiety and tribulation and accept my lovely, faultless child from my hands."

That was what Lady Agnes had always meant, more or less, that was what Grace had meant, and they meant it with singular lucidity on the present occasion. Lady Agnes meant it so much that from one moment to another Peter scarcely

knew what she might do; and Grace meant it so much that she had rushed away in a hansom to fetch her sister from the studio. Grace, however, was a fool, for Biddy certainly wouldn't come. The news of his promotion had set them off, adding brightness to their idea of his being an excellent match; bringing home to them sharply the sense that if he were going away to strange countries he must take Biddy with him—that something at all events must be settled about Biddy before he went. They had suddenly began to throb with the conviction that they had no time to lose.

Strangely enough, the perception of all this had not the effect of throwing Peter on the defensive, or at least of making him wish to bolt. When once he had discovered what was in the air he recognized a propriety, a real felicity in it; could not deny that he was in certain ways a good match, since it was quite probable he would go far; and was even generous enough (as he had no fear of being dragged to the altar) to enter into the conception that he might offer some balm to a mother who had had a horrid disappointment. The feasibility of marrying Biddy was not exactly augmented by the idea that his doing so would be a great offset to what Nick had made Lady Agnes suffer; but at any rate Peter did not dislike his strenuous companion so much as to wish to punish her for being strenuous. He was not afraid of her, whatever she might do; and though he was unable to grasp the practical relevancy of Biddy's being produced on the instant he was willing to linger for half an hour on the chance of her turning up.

There was a certain contagion in Lady Agnes's appeal—it

made him appeal sensibly to himself. For indeed, as it is time to say, the glass of our young man's spirit had been polished for that reflection. It was only at this moment that he became really candid with himself. When he made up his mind that his only safety was in flight and took the strong measure of asking for assistance to flee, he was very conscious that another and probably still more effectual safeguard (especially if the two should be conjoined) lay in the hollow of his hand. Julia Dallow's words in Paris had come back to him and had seemed much wiser than when they were spoken: "She'll save you disappointments; you would know the worst that can happen to you, and it wouldn't be bad." Julia had put it into a nutshell—Biddy would probably save him disappointments. And then she was—well, she was Biddy. Peter knew better what that was since the hour he had spent with her in Rosedale Road. But he had brushed away the sense of it, though he was aware that in doing so he took only half measures, was even guilty of a sort of fraud upon himself. If he was sincere in wishing to put a gulf between his future and that portion of his past and present which was associated with Miriam Rooth, there was a very simple way to do so. He had dodged that way, dishonestly fixing upon another which, taken alone, was far from being so good; but Lady Agnes brought him back to it. She held him in magnanimous contemplation of it, during which the safety, as Julia had called it, of the remedy became fascinating to his mind, especially as that safety appeared not to exclude a concomitant sweetness. It would be simple and it would swallow up his problems; it would put an end to all alternatives, which, as alternatives

were otherwise putting an end to him, would be an excellent thing. It would settle the whole question of his future, and it was high time this should be settled.

Peter took two cups of coffee while he made out his future with Lady Agnes, but though he drank them slowly he had finished them before Biddy turned up. He stayed three-quarters of an hour, saying to himself that she wouldn't come —why should she come? Lady Agnes said nothing about this; she really, in vulgar vocables, said nothing about any part of the business. But she made him fix the next day but one for coming to dinner, and her repeated declaration that there would be no one else, not another creature but themselves, had almost the force of a legal paper. In giving his word that he would come without fail and not write the next day to throw them over for some function that he should choose to dub obligatory, Peter felt quite as if he were putting his name to such a document. He went away at half-past three; Biddy of course hadn't come, and he had been certain she wouldn't. He couldn't imagine what Grace's idea had been, nor what pretext she had put forward to her sister. Whatever it had been, Biddy had seen through it and hated such machinations. Peter could only like her the better for that.

VIII.

Lady Agnes would doubtless have done better, in her own interest or in that of her child, to have made sure of Peter's company for the very next evening. This she had indeed attempted, but the application of the idea had failed. Peter had a theory that he was inextricably engaged; moreover her ladyship could not take upon herself to answer for Nick. Of course they must have Nick, though, to tell the truth, the hideous truth, she and her son were scarcely upon terms. Peter insisted on Nick, he wished particularly to see him and he gave his hostess notice that he would make each of them forgive everything to the other. Lady Agnes declared that all her son had to forgive was her loving him more than her life, and she would have challenged Peter, had he allowed it, on the general ground of the comparative dignity of the two arts of painting portraits and governing nations. Peter declined the challenge; the most he did was to intimate that he perhaps saw Nick more vividly as a painter than as a governor. Later he remembered vaguely something Lady Agnes had said about their being a governing family.

He was going, by what he could ascertain, to a very queer climate, and he had many preparations to make. He gave his best attention to these, and for a couple of hours after leaving Lady Agnes he rummaged London for books from which he

might extract information about his new habitat. It made apparently no great figure in literature, so that Peter could reflect that he was perhaps destined to find a salutary distraction in filling the void with a volume of impressions. After he had gathered that there were no books he went into the Park. He treated himself to an afternoon or two there when he happened to drop upon London in the summer: it refreshed his sense of the British interests he would have to stand up for. Moreover, he had been hiding more or less, and now all that was changed and this was the simplest way not to hide. He met a host of friends, made his situation as public as possible and accepted on the spot a great many invitations, subject to the mental reservation that he should allow none of them to interfere with his being present the first night of Miriam's new venture. He was going to the equator to get away from her, but to break with the past with some decency of form he must show an affected interest, if he could muster none other, in an occasion that meant so much for her. The least intimate of her associates would do that, and Peter remembered that, at the expense of good manners, he had stayed away from her first appearance on any stage. He would have been shocked if he had found himself obliged to go back to Paris without giving her his personal countenance at the imminent crisis, so good a right had she to expect it.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he went to Great Stanhope Street to dress for dinner and learn that a note which he found on the hall table, and which bore the marks of hasty despatch, had come in three or four hours before. It exhibited the signature of Miriam Rooth and informed him that she

positively expected him at the theatre at eleven o'clock the next morning, for which hour a dress-rehearsal of the revived play had been hurriedly determined upon, the first night being now definitely fixed for the impending Saturday. She counted upon his attendance at both ceremonies, but she had particular reasons for wishing to see him at the rehearsal. "I want you to see and judge and tell me," she said, "for my mind's like a flogged horse—it won't give another kick." It was for the Saturday he had made Lady Agnes his promise; he had thought of the possibility of the play in doing so, but had rested in the faith that, from valid symptoms, this complication would not occur till the following week. He decided nothing on the spot in relation to the conflict—it was enough to dash off three words to Miriam to the effect that he would sooner perish than fail her on the morrow.

He went to the theatre in the morning, and the episode proved curious and instructive. Though there were twenty people in the stalls it bore little resemblance to those *répétitions générales* to which, in Paris, his love of the drama had often attracted him and which, taking place at night in the theatre closed to the public, are virtually first performances with invited spectators. They were, to his sense, always settled and stately and were rehearsals of the *première* even more than rehearsals of the play. The present occasion was less august; it was not so much a concert as a confusion of sounds, and it took audible and at times disputatious counsel with itself. It was rough and frank and spasmodic, but it was vivid and strong and, in spite of the serious character of the piece, often exceedingly droll; while it gave Sherringham,

oddly enough, a livelier sense than he had ever had of bending over the hissing, smoking, sputtering caldron in which a palatable performance is stewed. He looked into the gross darkness that may result from excess of light; that is he understood how knocked up, on the eve of production, every one concerned in the preparation of a play might be, with nerves overstretched and glasses blurred, awaiting the test and the response, the echo to be given back by the big, receptive, artless, stupid, delightful public. Sherringham's interest had been great in advance, and as Miriam, since his arrival, had taken him much into her confidence he knew what she intended to do and had discussed a hundred points with her. They had differed about some of them and she had always said: "Ah, but wait till you see how I shall do it at the time!" That was usually her principal reason and her most convincing argument. She had made some changes at the last hour—she was going to do several things in another way. But she wanted a touchstone, she wanted a fresh ear and, as she told Sherringham when he went behind after the first act, that was why she had insisted on this private performance, to which a few fresh ears were to be admitted. They didn't want to let her have it—they were a parcel of donkeys; but as to what she meant in general to have she had given them a hint which she flattered herself they wouldn't soon forget.

Miriam spoke as if she had had a great battle with her fellow-workers and had routed them utterly. It was not the first time Sherringham had heard her talk as if such a life as hers could only be a fighting life, so that she frankly recognized the fine uses of a faculty for making a row. She

rejoiced that she had this faculty, for she knew what to do with it; and though there might be a certain swagger in taking such a stand in advance, when one had done the infinitely little that she had done, yet she trusted to the future to show how right she should have been in believing that a pack of idiots would never hold out against her, would know that they couldn't afford to. Her assumption of course was that she fought for the light and the right, for the good way and the thorough, for doing a thing properly if one did it at all. What she had really wanted was the theatre closed for a night and the dress-rehearsal, put on for a few people, given instead of "Yolande." That she had not got, but she would have it the next time. She spoke as if her triumphs behind the scenes as well as before would go by leaps and bounds, and Sherringham perfectly believed, for the time, that she would drive her coadjutors in front of her like sheep. Her tone was the sort of thing that would have struck one as preposterous if one didn't believe in her; but if one did believe in her it only seemed thrown in with the other gifts. How was she going to act that night, and what could be said for such a hateful way of doing things? She asked Sherringham questions that he was quite unable to answer; she abounded in superlatives and tremendously strong objections. He had a sharper vision than usual of the queer fate, for a peaceable man, of being involved in a life of so violent a rhythm: one might as well be hooked to a Catharine-wheel and whiz round in flame and smoke.

It was only for five minutes, in the wing, amid jostling and shuffling and shoving, that they held this conference. Miriam,

splendid in a brocaded anachronism, a false dress of the beginning of the century, and excited and appealing, imperious and reckless and good-natured, full of exaggerated propositions, supreme determinations and comical irrelevancies, showed as radiant a young head as the stage had ever seen. Other people quickly surrounded her, and Sherringham saw that though she wanted a fresh ear and a fresh eye she was liable to tell those who possessed these advantages that they didn't know what they were talking about. It was rather hard with her (Basil Dashwood let him into this, wonderfully painted and in a dress even more beautiful than Miriam's—that of a young dandy of the ages of silk): if you were not in the business you were one kind of donkey and if you *were* in the business you were another kind. Sherringham noted with a certain displeasure that Gabriel Nash was not there; he preferred to believe that it was from this observation that his annoyance happened to come when Miriam, after the remark just quoted from Dashwood, laughing and saying that at any rate the thing would do because it would just have to do, thrust vindictively but familiarly into the young actor's face a magnificent feather fan. "Isn't he too lovely," she asked, "and doesn't he know how to do it?" Basil Dashwood had the sense of costume even more than Sherringham supposed, inasmuch as it now appeared that he had gone profoundly into the question of what his clever comrade was to wear. He had drawn patterns and hunted up stuffs, had helped her to try on her clothes, had bristled with ideas and pins. It is not perfectly easy to explain why Sherringham grudged Gabriel Nash the cynicism of his absence; it may even be thought

singular that he should have missed him. At any rate he flushed a little when Miriam, of whom he inquired whether she hadn't invited her oldest and dearest friend, exclaimed: "Oh, he says he doesn't like the kitchen fire—he only wants the pudding!" It would have taken the kitchen fire to account at that moment for the red of Sherringham's cheek; and he was indeed uncomfortably heated by helping to handle, as he phrased it, the saucepans.

This he felt so much after he had returned to his seat, which he forbore to quit again till the curtain had fallen on the last act, that in spite of the high beauty of that part of the performance of which Miriam carried the weight there was a moment when his emancipation led him to give a suppressed gasp of relief, as if he were scrambling up the bank of a torrent after an immersion. The girl herself, at any rate, as was wholly right, was of the incorruptible faith: she had been saturated to good purpose with the great spirit of Madame Carré. That was conspicuous as the play went on and she watched over the detail with weary piety and passion. Sherringham had never liked the piece itself; he thought that as clumsy in form and false in feeling it did little honour to the British theatre; he hated many of the speeches, pitied Miriam for having to utter them and considered that, lighted by that sort of candle, the path of fame might very well lead nowhere.

When the rehearsal was over he went behind again, and in the rose-coloured satin of the *dénoûment* the heroine of the occasion said to him: "Fancy my having to drag through that other stuff to-night—the brutes!" He was vague about the persons designated in this allusion, but he let it pass: he

had at the moment a kind of detached foreboding of the way any gentleman familiarly connected with Miriam in the future would probably form the habit of letting objurgations and some other things pass. This had become indeed, now, a frequent state of mind with him; the instant he was before her, near her, next her, he found himself a helpless subject of the spell which, so far at least as he was concerned, she put forth by contact and of which the potency was punctual and absolute: the fit came on, as he said, exactly as some esteemed express-train on a great line bangs at a given moment into the station. At a distance he partly recovered himself—that was the encouragement for going to the shaky republic; but as soon as he entered her presence his life struck him as a thing disconnected from his will. It was as if *he* had been one thing and his behaviour another; he had glimpses of pictures of this difference, drawn, as they might be, from the coming years—little illustrative scenes in which he saw himself in strange attitudes of resignation, always rather sad and still, with a slightly bent head. Such images should not have been inspiring, but it is a fact that they were decidedly fascinating. The gentleman with the bent head had evidently given up something that was dear to him, but it was exactly because he had got his price that he was there. "Come and see me three or four hours hence," Miriam said—"come, that is, about six. I shall rest till then, but I want particularly to talk with you. There will be no one else—not the end of any one's nose. You'll do me good." So of course Peter drove up to Balaklava Place about six.

IX.

"I DON'T know—I haven't the least idea—I don't care—don't ask me," he broke out immediately, in answer to some question that she put to him, with little delay, about his sense of the way she had done certain things at the theatre. Had she not frankly better give up that way and return to their first idea, the one they had talked over so much? Sherringham declared that it was no idea of his; that at any rate he should never have another as long as he lived; and that, so help him heaven, they had talked such things over more than enough.

"You're tired of me—yes, already," said Miriam, sadly and kindly. They were alone, her mother had not peeped out, and she had prepared herself to return to the theatre. "However, it doesn't matter, and of course your head is full of other things. You must think me ravenously selfish—perpetually chattering about my little shop. What will you have, when one's a shop-girl? You used to like it, but then you weren't a minister."

"What do you know about my being a minister?" Sherringham asked, leaning back in his chair and gazing at her from sombre eyes. Sometimes he thought she looked better on the stage than she did off it, and sometimes he thought the

exact contrary. The former of these convictions had held his mind in the morning, and it was now punctually followed by the other. As soon as she stepped on the boards a great and special alteration usually took place in her—she was in focus and in her frame; yet there were hours too in which she wore her world's face before the audience, just as there were hours when she wore her stage face in the world. She took up either mask as it suited her humour. To-day Sherringham was seeing each in its order, and he thought each the best.

"I should know very little if I waited for you to tell me—that's very certain," Miriam answered. "It's in the papers that you've got a high appointment, but I don't read the papers unless there's something in them about myself. Next week I shall devour them and think them drivelling too, no doubt. It was Basil Dashwood told me, this afternoon, of your promotion—he has seen it announced somewhere. I'm delighted if it gives you more money and more advantages, but don't expect me to be glad that you're going away to some distant, disgusting country."

"The matter has only just been settled and we have each been busy with our own affairs. Even if you hadn't given me these opportunities," Sherringham went on, "I should have tried to see you to-day, to tell you my news and take leave of you."

"Take leave? Aren't you coming to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes, I shall see you through that. But I shall rush away the very moment it's over."

"I shall be much better then—really I shall," the girl said.

"The better you are the worse you are."

Miriam returned his gaze with a beautiful charity. "If it would do you any good I would be bad."

"The worse you are the better you are!" laughed Sherringham. "You're a kind of devouring demon."

"Not a bit! It's you."

"It's I? I like that."

"It's you who make trouble, who are sore and suspicious and supersubtle, not taking things as they come and for what they are, but twisting them into misery and falsity. Oh, I've watched you enough, my dear friend, and I've been sorry for you—and sorry for myself; for I'm not so taken up with myself as you think. I'm not such a low creature. I'm capable of gratitude, I'm capable of affection. One may live in paint and tinsel, but one isn't absolutely without a soul. Yes, I've got one," the girl went on, "though I do paint my face and practise my intonations. If what you are going to do is good for you I'm very glad. If it leads to good things, to honour and fortune and greatness, I'm enchanted. If it means your being away always, forever and ever, of course that's serious. You know it—I needn't tell you—I regard you as I really don't regard any one else. I have a confidence in you—ah, it's a luxury. You're a gentleman, *mon bon*—ah, you're a gentleman! It's just that. And then you see, you understand, and that's a luxury too. You're a luxury altogether, Mr. Sherringham. Your being where I shall never see you is not a thing I shall enjoy; I know that from the separation of these last months—after our beautiful life in Paris, the best thing that ever happened to me or that ever will. But if it's your career, if it's your happiness, I can

miss you and hold my tongue. I *can* be disinterested—I can!"

"What did you desire me to come for?" Sherringham asked, attentive and motionless. The same impression, the old impression was with him again; the sense that if she was sincere it was sincerity of execution, if she was genuine it was the genuineness of doing it well. She did it so well now that this very fact was charming and touching. When she asked him at the theatre to grant her the hour in the afternoon, she wanted candidly (the more as she had not seen him at home for several days) to go over with him once again, on the eve of the great night (it would be for her second attempt the critics would lie so in wait—the first success might have been a fluke), some of her recurrent doubts: knowing from experience what good ideas he often had, how he could give a worrying alternative its quietus at the last. Then she had heard from Dashwood of the change in his situation, and that had really from one moment to the other made her think sympathetically of his preoccupations—led her open-handedly to drop her own. She was sorry to lose him and eager to let him know how good a friend she was conscious that he had been to her. But the expression of this was already, at the end of a minute, a strange bedevilment: she began to listen to herself, to speak dramatically, to represent. She uttered the things she felt as if they were snatches of old play-books, and really felt them the more because they sounded so well. This however didn't prevent them from being as good feelings as those of anybody else, and at the moment Sherringham, to still a rising emotion—which he knew he shouldn't still—

articulated the challenge I have just recorded, she seemed to him to have at any rate the truth of gentleness and generosity.

"There's something the matter with you—you're jealous," said Miriam. "You're jealous of Mr. Dormer. That's an example of the way you tangle everything up. Lord, he won't hurt you, nor me either!"

"He can't hurt me, my dear, and neither can you; for I have a nice little heart of stone and a smart new breast-plate of iron. The interest I take in you is something quite extraordinary; but the most extraordinary thing in it is that it's perfectly prepared to tolerate the interest of others."

"The interest of others needn't trouble it much!" Miriam declared. "If Mr. Dormer had broken off his marriage to such an awfully fine woman (for she is that, your swell of a sister), it isn't for a loud wretch like me. He's kind to me because that's his nature, and he notices me because that's his business; but he's away up in the clouds—a thousand miles over my head. He has got something 'on,' as they say; he's in love with an idea. I think it's a shocking bad one, but that's his own affair. He's quite *exalté;* living on nectar and ambrosia—what he has to spare for us poor crawling things on earth is only a few dry crumbs. I didn't even ask him to come to rehearsal. Besides, he thinks you're in love with me and that it wouldn't be honourable to cut in. He's capable of that—isn't it charming?"

"If he were to relent and give up his scruples, would you marry him?" asked Sherringham.

"Mercy, how you chatter about marrying!" the girl laughed. "You've all got it on the brain."

"Why, I put it that way to please you, because you complained to me last year precisely that this was not what seemed generally to be wanted."

"Oh, last year!" Miriam murmured. Then, differently: "Yes, it's very tiresome!" she exclaimed.

"You told me moreover in Paris, more than once, that you wouldn't listen to anything but that."

"Well, I won't, but I shall wait till I find a husband who's bad enough. One who'll beat me and swindle me and spend my money on other women—that's the sort of man for me. Mr. Dormer, delightful as he is, doesn't come up to that."

"You'll marry Basil Dashwood," Sherringham replied.

"Oh, marry?—call it marry, if you like. That's what poor mother says—she lives in dread of it."

"To this hour," said Sherringham, "I haven't managed to make out what your mother wants. She has so many ideas, as Madame Carré said."

"She wants me to be a tremendous sort of creature—all her ideas are reducible to that. What makes the muddle is that she isn't clear about the kind of creature she wants most. A great actress or a great lady—sometimes she inclines for one and sometimes for the other; but on the whole she persuades herself that a great actress, if she'll cultivate the right people, may *be* a great lady. When I tell her that won't do and that a great actress can never be anything but a great vagabond, then the dear old thing has tantrums and we have

scenes—the most grotesque: they'd make the fortune, for a subject, of some play-writing fellow, if he had the wit to guess them; which, luckily for us perhaps, he never will. She usually winds up by protesting—*devinez un peu quoi!*" Miriam added. And as her companion professed his complete inability to divine: "By declaring that rather than take it that way I must marry *you*."

"She's shrewder than I thought. It's the last of vanities to talk about it, but I may mention in passing that if you would marry me you should be the greatest of all possible ladies."

"Heavens, my dear fellow, what natural capacity have I for that?"

"You're artist enough for anything. I shall be a great diplomatist: my resolution is firmly taken. I'm infinitely cleverer than you have the least idea of, and you shall be a great diplomatist's wife."

"And the demon, the devil, the devourer and destroyer, that you are so fond of talking about: what, in such a position, do you do with that element of my nature? *Où le fourrez-vous?*"

"I'll look after it, I'll keep it under. Rather perhaps I should say I'll bribe it and lull it—I'll gorge it with earthly grandeurs."

"That's better," said Miriam; "for a demon that's kept under is a shabby little demon. Don't let us be shabby." Then she added: "Do you really go away the beginning of next week?"

"Monday night, if possible."

"That's to Paris. Before you go to your new post they must give you an interval here."

"I shan't take it—I'm so tremendously keen for my duties. I shall insist on going sooner. Oh, I shall be concentrated now."

"I'll come and act there," said Miriam, with her handsome smile. "I've already forgotten what it was I wanted to discuss with you: it was some trumpery stuff. What I want to say now is only one thing: that it's not in the least true that because my life pitches me in every direction and mixes me up with all sorts of people—or rather with one sort mainly, poor dears!—I haven't a decent character, I haven't common honesty. Your sympathy, your generosity, your patience, your precious suggestions, our dear, sweet days last summer in Paris, I shall never forget. You're the best—you're different from all the others. Think of me as you please and make profane jokes about my matrimonial prospects—I shall think of *you* only in one way. I have a great respect for you. With all my heart I hope you'll be a great diplomatist. God bless you!"

Miriam got up as she spoke and in so doing she glanced at the clock—a movement which somehow only added to the noble gravity of her discourse: it was as if she were considering his time, not her own. Sherringham, at this, rising too, took out his watch and stood a moment with his eyes bent upon it, though without in the least perceiving what the needles marked.

"You'll have to go, to reach the theatre at your usual hour, won't you? Let me not keep you. That is, let me keep you

only long enough just to say this, once for all, as I shall never speak of it again. I'm going away to save myself," Sherringham went on deliberately, standing before her and soliciting her eyes with his own. "I ought to go, no doubt, in silence, in decorum, in virtuous submission to hard necessity—without asking for credit or sympathy, without provoking any sort of scene or calling attention to my fortitude. But I can't—upon my soul I can't. I can go, I can see it through, but I can't hold my tongue. I want you to know all about it, so that over there, when I'm bored to death, I shall at least have the exasperatingly vain consolation of feeling that you do know—and that it does neither you nor me any good!"

He paused a moment, upon which Miriam asked: "That I do know what?"

"That I have a consuming passion for you and that it's impossible."

"Ah, impossible, my friend!" she sighed, but with a quickness in her assent.

"Very good; it interferes, the gratification of it would interfere fatally, with the ambition of each of us. Our ambitions are odious, but we are tied fast to them."

"Ah, why ain't we simple?" Miriam quavered. "Why ain't we of the people—*comme tout le monde*—just a man and a girl liking each other?"

Sherringham hesitated a moment; she was so tenderly mocking, so sweetly ambiguous, as she said this. "Because we are precious asses! However, I'm simple enough, after all, to care for you as I have never cared for any human creature. You have, as it happens, a personal charm for me that no one

has ever approached, and from the top of your splendid head to the sole of your theatrical shoe (I could go down on my face—there, abjectly—and kiss it!) every inch of you is dear and delightful to me. Therefore good-bye."

Miriam stared, at this, with wider eyes: he had put the matter in a way that struck her. For a moment, all the same, he was afraid she would reply as if she had often heard that sort of thing before. But she was too much moved—the pure colour that had risen to her face showed it—to have recourse to this particular facility. She was moved even to the glimmer of tears, though she gave him her hand with a smile. "I'm so glad you've said all that; for from you I know what it means. Certainly it's better for you to go away. Of course it's all wrong, isn't it?—but that's the only thing it can be: therefore it's all right, isn't it? Some day when we're great people we'll talk these things over; then we shall be quiet, we shall be at peace—let us hope so at least—and better friends than people will know." She paused a moment, smiling still; then she said while he held her hand: "Don't, *don't* come to-morrow night."

With this she attempted to draw her hand away, as if everything were settled and over; but the effect of her movement was that, as he held her hand tight, he was simply drawn toward her and close to her. The effect of this, in turn, was that, releasing her only to possess her more, he seized her in his arms and breathing deeply "I love you!" clasped her in a long embrace. It was so long that it gave the door of the room time to open before either of them had taken notice. Mrs. Rooth, who had not peeped in before,

peeped in now, becoming in this matter witness of an incident she could scarcely have expected. The unexpected indeed, for Mrs. Rooth, had never been an insuperable element in things; it was her system, in general, to be too much in harmony to be surprised. As the others turned round they saw her standing there and smiling at them, and heard her ejaculate with wise indulgence:

"Oh, you extravagant children!"

Miriam brushed off her tears, quickly but unconfusedly. "He's going away—he's bidding us farewell."

Sherringham—it was perhaps a result of his general agitation—laughed out at the "us" (he had already laughed at the charge of puerility), and Mrs. Rooth returned: "Going away? Ah, then I must have one too!" And she held out both her hands. Sherringham stepped forward and, taking them, kissed her respectfully on each cheek, in the foreign manner, while she continued: "Our dear old friend—our kind, gallant gentleman!"

"The gallant gentleman has been promoted to a great post—the proper reward of his gallantry," Miriam said. "He's going out as minister to some impossible place—where is it?"

"As minister—how very charming! We *are* getting on." And the old woman gave him a curious little upward interrogative leer.

"Oh, well enough. One must take what one can get," he answered.

"You'll get everything now, I'm sure, sha'n't you?" Mrs. Rooth asked, with an inflection that called back to him,

comically (the source was so different), the very vibrations he had noted the day before in Lady Agnes's voice.

"He's going to glory and he'll forget all about us—forget that he has ever known such people. So we shall never see him again, and it's better so. Good-bye, good-bye," Miriam repeated; "the brougham must be there, but I won't take you. I want to talk to mother about you, and we shall say things not fit for you to hear. Oh, I'll let you know what we lose—don't be afraid," she added to Mrs. Rooth. "He's the rising star of diplomacy."

"I knew it from the first—I know how things turn out for such people as you!" cried the old woman, gazing fondly at Sherringham. "But you don't mean to say you're not coming to-morrow night?"

"Don't—don't; it's great folly," Miriam interposed; "and it's quite needless, since you saw me to-day."

Sherringham stood looking from the mother to the daughter, the former of whom broke out to the latter: "Oh, you dear rogue, to say one has *seen* you yet! You know how you'll come up to it; you'll be transcendent."

"Yes, I shall be there—certainly," said Sherringham, at the door, to Mrs. Rooth.

"Oh, you dreadful goose!" Miriam called after him. But he went out without looking round at her.

X.

Nick Dormer had for the hour quite taken up his abode at his studio, where Biddy usually arrived after breakfast to give him news of the state of affairs in Calcutta Gardens and where many letters and telegrams were now addressed to him. Among such missives, on the morning of the Saturday on which Peter Sherringham had promised to dine at the other house, was a note from Miriam Rooth, informing Nick that if he should not telegraph to put her off she would turn up about half-past eleven, probably with her mother, for just one more sitting She added that it was a nervous day for her and that she couldn't keep still, so that it would really be very kind to let her come to him as a refuge. She wished to stay away from the theatre, where everything was now settled (or so much the worse for the others if it wasn't), till the evening, but if she were left to herself should be sure to go there. It would keep her quiet and soothe her to sit—he could keep her quiet (he was such a blessing that way !) at any time. Therefore she would give him two or three hours—or rather she would ask him for them—if he didn't positively turn her from the door.

It had not been definite to Nick that he wanted another sitting at all for the slight work, as he held it to be, that Miriam had already helped him to achieve. He regarded this

work as a kind of pictorial *obiter dictum:* he had made what he could of it and would have been at a loss to see how he could make more. If it was not finished, this was because it was not finishable; at any rate he had said all he had to say in that particular phrase. Nick Dormer, as it happened, was not just now in the highest spirits; his imagination had within two or three days become conscious of a check which he tried to explain by the idea of a natural reaction. Any important change, any new selection in one's life was exciting, and exaggerate that importance and one's own as little as one would, there was an inevitable strong emotion in renouncing, in the face of considerable opposition, one sort of responsibility for another sort. That made life not perhaps necessarily joyous, but decidedly thrilling, for the hour; and it was all very well till the thrill abated. When this occurred, as it inevitably would, the romance and the poetry of the thing would be exchanged for the flatness and the prose. It was to these latter elements that Nick Dormer had waked up pretty wide on this particular morning; and the prospect was not appreciably more blooming from the fact that he had warned himself in advance that it would be dull. He had known how dull it would be, but now he would have time to learn that even better. A reaction was a reaction, but it was not after all a catastrophe. A part of its privilege would be to make him ask himself if he had not committed a great mistake; that privilege would doubtless even remain within the limits of its nature in leading him to reply to this question in the affirmative. But he would live to withdraw such a concession —this was the first thing to bear in mind.

He was occupied, even while he dressed, in the effort to get forward mentally with some such retractation when, by the first post, Miriam's note arrived. At first it did little to help him in his effort, for it made him contrast her eagerness with his own want of alacrity and ask himself what the deuce he should do with her. Ambition, with her, was always on the charge, and she was not a person to conceive that others might in bad moments listen for the trumpet in vain. It would never have occurred to her that only the day before he had spent a portion of the afternoon quite at the bottom of the hill. He had in fact turned into the National Gallery and had wandered about there for more than one hour, and it was just while he did so that the immitigable recoil had begun perversely to set in. And the perversity was all the greater from the circumstance that if the experience was depressing it was not because he had been discouraged beyond measure by the sight of the grand things that had been done—things so much grander than any that would ever bear his signature. That variation he was duly acquainted with and should taste in abundance again. What had happened to him, as he passed on this occasion from Titian to Rubens and from Gainsborough to Rembrandt, was that he found himself calling the whole art literally into question. What was it after all, at the best, and why had people given it so high a place? Its weakness, its narrowness appeared to him; tacitly blaspheming he looked at several world-famous performances with a lustreless eye. That is he blasphemed if it were blasphemy to say to himself that, with all respect, they were a poor business, only well enough in their small way. The force that produced

them was not one of the greatest forces in human affairs; their place was inferior and their connection with the life of man casual and slight. They represented so inadequately the idea, and it was the idea that won the race, that in the long run came in first. He had incontestably been in much closer relation to the idea a few months before than he was to-day: it made up a great deal for the bad side of politics that they were after all a clumsy system for applying and propagating the idea. The love of it had really been at certain hours at the bottom of his disposition to follow them up; though this had not been what he used to talk of most with his political comrades or even with Julia. Certainly, political as Julia was, he had not conferred with her much about the idea. However, this might have been his own fault quite as much as hers, and she probably took such an enthusiasm for granted—she took such a tremendous lot of things for granted. On the other hand he had put this enthusiasm forward frequently in his many discussions with Gabriel Nash, with the effect, it is true, of making that worthy scoff transcendentally at what he was pleased to term his hypocrisy. Gabriel maintained precisely that there were more ideas, more of those that man lived by, in a single room of the National Gallery than in all the statutes of Parliament. Nick had replied to this more than once that the determination of what man did live by was required; to which Nash had retorted (and it was very rarely that he quoted Scripture) that it was at any rate not by bread-and-butter alone. The statutes of Parliament gave him bread-and-butter *tout au plus.*

Nick Dormer at present had no pretension of trying this

question over again; he reminded himself that his ambiguity was subjective, as the philosophers said; the result of a mood which in due course would be at the mercy of another mood. It made him curse, and cursing, as a finality, was shaky; so he would throw out a platform beyond it. The time far beyond others to do one's work was when it didn't seem worth doing, for then one gave it a brilliant chance, that of resisting the stiffest test of all—the test of striking one as very bad. To do the most when there would be the least to be got by it was to be most in the true spirit of production. One thing at any rate was very certain, Nick reflected: nothing on earth would induce him to change back again; not even if this twilight of the soul should last for the rest of his days. He hardened himself in his posture with a good conscience which, had they had a glimpse of it, would have made him still more diverting to those who already thought him so; but now by good fortune Miriam suddenly knocked together the little bridge that was wanted to carry him over to more elastic ground. If he had made his sketch it was a proof that he had done her, and that he had done her flashed upon him as a sign that she would be still more feasible. He found his platform, as I have called it, and for a moment in his relief he danced upon it. He sent out a telegram to Balaklava Place requesting his beautiful sitter by no manner of means to fail him. When his servant came back it was to usher into the studio Peter Sherringham, whom the man had apparently found at the door.

The hour was so early for social intercourse that Nick immediately guessed his visitor had come on some rare errand;

but this inference was instantly followed by the reflection that Peter might after all only wish to make up by present zeal for not having been near him before. He forgot that, as as he had subsequently learned from Biddy, their foreign or all but foreign cousin had spent an hour in Rosedale Road, missing him there but pulling out Miriam's portrait, the day of his own hurried visit to Beauclere. These young men were not on a ceremonious footing and it was not in Nick's nature to keep a record of civilities rendered or omitted; nevertheless he had been vaguely conscious that during a stay in London, on Peter's part, which apparently was stretching itself out, he and his kinsman had foregathered less than of yore. It was indeed an absorbing moment in the career of each, but at the same time that he recognized this truth Nick remembered that it was not impossible Peter might have taken upon himself to resent some supposititious failure of consideration for Julia; though this would have been stupid, and the newly-appointed minister (to he had forgotten where) cultivated a finer habit. Nick held that as he had treated Julia with studious generosity she had nothing whatever to reproach him with; so her brother had therefore still less. It was at any rate none of her brother's business. There were only two things that would have made Nick lukewarm about disposing in a few frank words of all this: one of them his general hatred of talking of his private affairs (a reluctance in which he and Peter were well matched); and the other a particular sentiment which would have involved more of a confession and which could not be otherwise described than as a perception that the most definite and even most pleasant consequence of

the collapse of his engagement was, as it happened, an extreme consciousness of freedom. Nick Dormer's observation was of a different sort from his cousin's; he noted much less the signs of the hour and kept altogether a looser register of life. Nevertheless, just as one of our young men had during these days in London found the air peopled with personal influences, the concussion of human atoms, so the other, though only asking to live without too many questions and work without too many disasters, to be glad and sorry in short on easy terms, had become aware of a certain social tightness, of the fact that life is crowded and passion is restless, accident frequent and community inevitable. Everybody with whom one had relations had other relations too, and even optimism was a mixture and peace an embroilment. The only chance was to let everything be embroiled but one's temper and everything spoiled but one's work. It must be added that Nick sometimes took precautions against irritation which were in excess of the danger, as departing travellers, about to whiz through foreign countries, study phrase-books for combinations of words they will never use. He was at home in the brightness of things—his longest excursions across the border were short. He had a dim sense that Peter considered that he made him uncomfortable and might have come now to tell him so; in which case he should be sorry for Peter in various ways. But as soon as his visitor began to speak Nick felt suspicion fade into old friendliness, and this in spite of the fact that Peter's speech had a slightly exaggerated promptitude, like the promptitude of business, which might have denoted self-consciousness. To Nick it quickly appeared better to be glad than to be sorry: this

simple argument was more than sufficient to make him glad Peter was there.

"My dear Nick, it's an unpardonable hour, isn't it? I wasn't even sure you'd be up, and yet I had to risk it because my hours are numbered. I'm going away to-morrow," Peter went on; "I've a thousand things to do. I've had no talk with you this time such as we used to have of old (it's an irreparable loss, but it's your fault, you know), and as I've got to rush about all day I thought I'd just catch you before any one else does."

"Some one has already caught me, but there's plenty of time," Nick returned.

Peter stared a moment, as if he were going to ask a question; then he thought better of this and said: "I see, I see. I'm sorry to say I've only a few minutes at best."

"Man of crushing responsibilities, you've come to humiliate me!" Nick exclaimed. "I know all about it."

"It's more than I do then. That's not what I've come for, but I shall be delighted if I humiliate you a little by the way. I've two things in mind, and I'll mention the most difficult first. I came here the other day—the day after my arrival in town."

"Ah, yes, so you did; it was very good of you," Nick interrupted, as if he remembered. "I ought to have returned your visit, or left a card or written my name or something, in Great Stanhope Street, oughtn't I? You hadn't got this new thing then, or I would have done so."

Peter eyed him a moment. "I say, what's the matter with you? Am I really unforgivable for having taken that liberty?"

"What liberty?" Nick looked now as if there were nothing whatever the matter with him, and indeed his visitor's allusion was not clear to him. He was thinking only for the instant of Biddy, of whom and whose secret inclinations Grace had insisted on talking to him. They were none of his business, and if he would not for the world have let the girl herself suspect that he had violent lights on what was most screened and curtained in her, much less would he have made Peter a clumsy present of this knowledge. Grace had a queer theory that Peter treated Biddy badly—treated them all, somehow, badly; but Grace's zeal (she had plenty of it, though she affected all sorts of fine indifference) almost always took the form of being wrong. Nick wanted to do only what Biddy would thank him for, and he knew very well what she wouldn't. She wished him and Peter to be great friends, and the only obstacle to this was that Peter was too much of a diplomatist. Peter made him for an instant think of her and of the hour they had lately spent together in the studio in his absence—an hour of which Biddy had given him a history full of detail and of omissions; and this in turn brought Nick's imagination back to his visitor's own side of the matter. That complexity of things of which the sense had lately increased with him, and to which it was owing that any thread one might take hold of would probably lead one to something discomfortable, was illustrated by the fact that while poor Biddy was thinking of Peter it was ten to one that poor Peter was thinking of Miriam Rooth. All this danced before Nick's intellectual vision for a space briefer than my too numerous words.

"I pitched into your treasures—I rummaged among your canvases," Peter said. "Biddy had nothing whatever to do with it—she maintained an attitude of irreproachable reserve. It has been on my conscience all these days, and I ought to have done penance before. I have been putting it off partly because I am so ashamed of my indiscretion. *Que voulez-vous*, my dear Nick? My provocation was great. I heard you had been painting Miss Rooth, so that I couldn't restrain my curiosity. I simply went into that corner and struck out there—a trifle wildly, no doubt. I dragged the young lady to the light—your sister turned pale as she saw me. It was a good deal like breaking open one of your letters, wasn't it? However, I assure you it's all right, for I congratulate you both on your style and on your correspondent."

"You're as clever, as witty, as humorous as ever, old boy," Nick rejoined, going himself into the corner designated by his companion and laying his hands on the same canvas. "Your curiosity is the highest possible tribute to my little attempt, and your sympathy sets me right with myself. There is she again," Nick went on, thrusting the picture into an empty frame; "you shall see her whether you wish to or not."

"Right with yourself? You don't mean to say you've been wrong!" Sherringham returned, standing opposite the portrait.

"Oh, I don't know; I've been kicking up such a row; anything is better than a row."

"She's awfully good—she's awfully true," said Sherringham. "You've done more to it, since the other day; you've put in several things."

"Yes, but I've worked distractedly. I've not altogether

conformed to the celebrated recommendation about being off with the old love."

"With the old love?" Sherringham repeated, looking hard at the picture.

"Before you are on with the new!" Nick had no sooner uttered these words than he coloured; it occurred to him that Peter would probably think he was alluding to Julia. He therefore added quickly: "It isn't so easy to cease to represent an affectionate constituency. Really, most of my time for a fortnight has been giving up to letter-writing. They've all been unexpectedly charming. I should have thought they would have loathed and despised me. But not a bit of it; they cling to me fondly—they struggle with me tenderly. I've been down to talk with them about it, and we've passed the most sociable, delightful hours. I've designated my successor; I've felt a good deal like the Emperor Charles the Fifth when about to retire to the monastery of Yuste. The more I've seen of them in this way the more I've liked them, and they declare it has been the same with themselves as regards me. We spend our time in assuring each other that we haven't begun to know each other till now. In short, it's all wonderfully jolly, but it isn't business. *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.*"

"They're not so charming as they might be if they don't offer to keep you and let you paint."

"They do, almost; it's fantastic," said Nick. "Remember they haven't seen any of my painting yet."

"Well, I'm sorry for you; we live in too enlightened an age," Peter declared. "You can't suffer for art. Your experience

is interesting; it seems to show that, at the tremendous pitch of civilization we've reached, you can't suffer from anything but hunger."

"I shall doubtless do that in abundance."

"Never, never, when you paint as well as this."

"Oh, come, you're too good to be true," Nick replied. "But where did you learn that one's larder is full in proportion as one's work is fine?"

Peter gave him no satisfaction on this curious point—he only continued to look at the picture; after which, in a moment, he said: "I'll give you your price for it on the spot."

"Dear boy, you're so magnanimous that you shall have it for nothing!" Nick exclaimed, passing his arm into his companion's.

Peter was silent at first. "Why do you call me magnanimous?"

"Oh, bless my soul, it's hers—I forget!" laughed Nick, failing in his turn to answer the other's inquiry. "But you shall have another."

"Another? Are you going to do another?"

"This very morning. That is I shall begin it. I've heard from her; she's coming to sit—a short time hence."

Peter turned away a little at this, releasing himself, and, as if the movement had been an effect of Nick's words, looked at his watch earnestly, to dissipate that appearance. He fell back, to consider the picture from further off. "The more you do her the better; she has all the qualities of a great model. From that point of view it's a pity she has another trade: she might make so good a thing of this one. But how shall you do her again?" Sherringham continued, ingenuously.

"Oh, I can scarcely say; we'll arrange something; we'll

talk it over. It's extraordinary how well she enters into what one wants: she knows more than one does one's self. She isn't the first comer. However, you know all about that, since you invented her, didn't you? That's what she says; she's awfully sweet on you," Nick pursued. "What I ought to do is to try something as different as possible from that thing; not the sibyl, the muse, the tremendous creature, but the charming woman, the person one knows, in different geor, as she appears *en ville*, as she calls it. I'll do something really serious and send it to you out there with my respects. It will remind you of home, and perhaps a little even of me. If she knows it's for you she'll throw herself into it in the right spirit. Leave it to us, my dear fellow; we'll turn out something good."

"It's jolly to hear you; but I shall send you a cheque," said Peter.

"I suppose it's all right in your position, but you're too proud," his kinsman answered.

"What do you mean by my position?"

"Your exaltation, your high connection with the country, your treating with sovereign powers as the representative of a sovereign power. Isn't that what they call 'em?"

Sherringham, who had turned again toward his companion, listened to this with his eyes fixed on Nick's face, while at the same time he once more drew forth his watch. "Brute!" he exclaimed familiarly, at the same time dropping his eyes on the watch. "At what time did you say you expected your sitter?"

"Oh, we've plenty of time; don't be afraid of letting me see you agitated by her presence."

"Brute!" Sherringham again ejaculated.

This friendly personal note cleared the air, made the communication between the two men closer. "Stay with me and talk to me," said Nick; "I dare say it's good for me. Heaven knows when I shall see you so independently again."

"Have you got something more to show me, then—some other work?" Sherringham asked.

"Must I bribe you by setting my signboards in a row? You know what I've done; by which I mean of course you know what I haven't done. My work, as you are so good as to call it, has hitherto been horrible rot. I've had no time, no opportunity, no continuity. I must go and sit down in a corner and learn my alphabet. That thing isn't good; what I shall do for you won't be good. Don't protest, my dear fellow; nothing will be fit to look at for a long time. And think of my ridiculous age. As the populace say (or don't they say it?) it's a rum go. It won't be amusing."

"Oh, you're so clever you'll get on fast," Sherringham replied, trying to think how he could most directly disobey his companion's injunction not to protest.

"I mean it won't be amusing for others," said Nick, unperturbed by this violation. "They want results, and small blame to them."

"Well, whatever you do, don't talk like Mr. Gabriel Nash," Peter went on. "Sometimes I think you're just going to."

Nick stared a moment. "Why, he never would have said that. 'They want results, the damned fools'—that would have been more in his key."

"It's the difference of a *nuance*. And are you extraor-

dinarily happy?" Peter added, as Nick now obliged him by arranging half a dozen canvases so that he could look at them.

"Not so much so, doubtless, as the artistic life ought to make one; because all one's people are not so infatuated as one's electors. But little by little I'm learning the beauty of obstinacy."

"Your mother's very bad; I lunched with her the day before yesterday."

"Yes, I know—I know," said Nick hastily; "but it's too late—it's too late. I must just peg away here and not mind. I've after all a great advantage in my life."

Sherringham hesitated. "And that would be—?"

"Oh, I mean knowing what I want to do: that's everything, you know."

"It's an advantage however that you've only just come in for, isn't it?"

"Yes, but having waited only makes me prize it the more. I've got it now; and it makes up, for the present, for the absence of some other things."

Again Sherringham was silent awhile. "That sounds a little flat," he remarked at last.

"It depends upon what you compare it with. It's rather more pointed than the House of Commons."

"Oh, I never thought I should like that."

There was another pause, during which Nick moved about the room, turning up old sketches to see if he had anything more to show his visitor, while Sherringham continued to look at the unfinished and in some cases, as it seemed to him, unpromising productions already submitted to his attention.

They were much less interesting than the portrait of Miriam Rooth and, it would have appeared, much less significant of ability. For that particular effort Nick's talent had taken an unprecedented spring. This was the reflection that Peter made, as he had made it intensely before; but the words he presently uttered had no visible connection with it. They only consisted of the abrupt inquiry: "Have you heard anything from Julia?"

"Not a syllable. Have you?"

"Dear, no; she never writes to me."

"But won't she on the occasion of your promotion?"

"I dare say not," said Peter: and this was the only reference to Mrs. Dallow that passed between her brother and her late intended. It left a slight agitation of the atmosphere, which Sherringham proceeded to allay by an allusion comparatively speaking more relevant. He expressed disappointment that Biddy should not have come in; having had an idea that she was always in Rosedale Road of a morning. That was the other moiety of his present errand—the wish to see her and give her a message for Lady Agnes, upon whom at so early an hour he had not presumed to intrude in Calcutta Gardens. Nick replied that Biddy did in point of fact almost always turn up, and for the most part early; she came to wish him good morning and start him for the day. She was a devoted Electra, laying a cool, healing hand on a distracted Orestes. He reminded Peter however that he would have a chance of seeing her that evening, and of seeing Lady Agnes; for wasn't he to do them the honour of dining in Calcutta Gardens? Biddy, the day before, had arrived full

of that excitement. Peter explained that this was exactly the sad subject of his actual *démarche:* the project of the dinner in Calcutta Gardens had, to his exceeding regret, fallen to pieces. The fact was (didn't Nick know it?) the night had been suddenly and perversely fixed for Miriam's *première*, and he was under a definite engagement with her not to stay away from it. To add to the bore of the thing he was obliged to return to Paris the very next morning. He was quite awfully sorry, for he had promised Lady Agnes: he didn't understand then about Miriam's affair, in regard to which he had given a previous pledge. He was more sorry than he could say, but he could never fail Miss Rooth: he had professed from the first an interest in her which he must live up to a little more. This was his last chance—he hadn't been near her at the trying time she first produced herself. And the second night of the play wouldn't do—it must be the first or nothing. Besides, he couldn't wait over till Monday.

While Peter enumerated these complications his companion was occupied in polishing with a cloth a palette that he had just been scraping. "I see what you mean—I'm very sorry too," said Nick. "I'm sorry you can't give my mother this joy—I give her so little."

"My dear fellow, you might give her a little more. It's rather too much to expect *me* to make up for your omissions!"

Nick looked at Peter with a moment's fixedness while he rubbed his palette; and for that moment he felt the temptation to reply: "There's a way you could do that, to a considerable extent—I think you guess it!—which wouldn't be intrinsically disagreeable." But the impulse passed, without expressing

itself in speech, and he simply answered: "You can make this all clear to Biddy when she comes, and she'll make it clear to my mother."

"Poor little Biddy!" Sherringham mentally exclaimed, thinking of the girl with that job before her; but what he articulated was that this was exactly why he had come to the studio. He had inflicted his company on Lady Agnes on Thursday and had partaken of a meal with her, but he had not seen Biddy, though he had waited for her, hoping she would come in. Now he would wait for her again—she was thoroughly worth it.

"Patience, patience, you've always me," said Nick; to which he subjoined: "If it's a question of going to the play I scarcely see why you shouldn't dine at my mother's all the same. People go to the play after dinner."

"Yes, but it wouldn't be fair, it wouldn't be decent: it's a case when I must be in my seat from the rise of the curtain. I should force your mother to dine an hour earlier than usual, and then, in return for this courtesy, go off to my entertainment at eight o'clock, leaving her and Grace and Biddy languishing there. I wish I had proposed in time that they should go with me," Peter continued, not very ingenuously.

"You might do that still," Nick suggested.

"Oh, at this time of day it would be impossible to get a box."

"I'll speak to Miss Rooth about it, if you like, when she comes," smiled Nick.

"No, it wouldn't do," said Peter, turning away and looking once more at his watch. He made tacitly the addition that still less than asking Lady Agnes, for his convenience, to dine

early, would *this* be decent, would it be fair. His taking Biddy the night he dined with her and with Miss Tressilian had been something very like a violation of those proprieties. He couldn't say this to Nick, who remarked in a moment that it was all right, for Peter's action left him his own freedom.

"Your own freedom?" Peter echoed interrogatively, turning round.

"Why, you see now I can go to the theatre myself."

"Certainly; I hadn't thought of that. You would have been going."

"I gave it up for the prospect of your company."

"Upon my word, you're too good—I don't deserve such sacrifices," said Sherringham, who saw from Nick's face that this was not a figure of speech but the absolute truth. "Didn't it however occur to you that, as it would turn out, I might—that I even naturally would—myself be going?" he added.

Nick broke into a laugh. "It would have occurred to me if I understood a little better—" And he paused, still laughing.

"If you understood a little better what?" Peter demanded.

"Your situation, simply."

Peter looked at him a moment. "Dine with me to-night independently; we'll go to the theatre together, and then you'll understand it."

"With pleasure, with pleasure: we'll have a jolly evening," said Nick.

"Call it jolly if you like. When did you say she was coming?" Peter asked.

"Biddy? Oh, probably, as I tell you, at any moment."

"I mean the great Miriam," Peter replied.

"The great Miriam, if she's punctual, will be here in about forty minutes."

"And will she be likely to find your sister?"

"My dear fellow, that will depend on whether my sister remains to see her."

"Exactly; but the point is whether you'll allow her to remain, isn't it?"

Nick looked slightly mystified. "Why shouldn't she do as she likes?"

"In that case she'll probably go."

"Yes, unless she stays."

"Don't let her," Peter dropped; "send her away." And to explain this he added: "It doesn't seem exactly the right sort of thing, young girls meeting actresses." His explanation in turn struck him as requiring another clause; so he went on: "At least it isn't thought the right sort of thing abroad, and even in England my foreign ideas stick to me."

Even with this amplification however his proposition evidently still appeared to his companion to have a flaw; which, after he had considered it a moment, Nick exposed in the simple words: "Why, you originally introduced them, in Paris—Biddy and Miss Rooth. Didn't they meet at your rooms and fraternize, and wasn't that much more abroad than this?"

"So they did, but she didn't like it," Peter answered, suspecting that for a diplomatist he looked foolish.

"Miss Rooth didn't like it?" Nick persisted.

"That I confess I've forgotten. Besides, she was not an actress then. What I remember is that Biddy wasn't particularly pleased with her."

"Why, she thought her wonderful—praised her to the skies. I remember too."

"She didn't like her as a woman; she praised her as an actress."

"I thought you said she wasn't an actress then," Nick rejoined.

Peter hesitated. "Oh, Biddy thought so. She has seen her since, moreover. I took her the other night, and her curiosity's satisfied."

"It's not of any consequence, and if there's a reason for it I'll bundle her off directly. But the great Miriam seems such a kind, good woman."

"So she is, charming—charming," said Peter, looking hard at Nick.

"Here comes Biddy now," this young man went on. "I hear her at the door; you can warn her yourself."

"It isn't a question of 'warning'—that's not in the least my idea. But I'll take Biddy away," said Peter.

"That will be still more energetic."

"Oh, it's simply selfish—I like her company." Peter had turned as if to go to the door to meet the girl; but he quickly checked himself, lingering in the middle of the room, and the next instant Biddy had come in. When she saw him there she also stopped.

XI.

"ARRIVE, arrive, my child," said Nick. "Peter's weary of waiting for you."

"Ah, he's come to say he won't dine with us to-night!" Biddy stood with her hand on the latch.

"I leave town to-morrow; I've everything to do; I'm broken-hearted; it's impossible," Peter pleaded. "Please make my peace with your mother; I'm ashamed of not having written to her last night."

Biddy closed the door and came in, while her brother said to her: "How in the world did you guess it?"

"I saw it in the *Morning Post*," Biddy answered, looking at Peter.

"In the *Morning Post?*" her cousin repeated.

"I saw there's to be a first night at that theatre, the one you took us to. So I said: 'Oh, he'll go there.'"

"Yes, I've got to do that too," Peter admitted.

"She's going to sit to me again this morning, the wonderful actress of that theatre—she has made an appointment: so you see I'm getting on," Nick announced to Biddy.

"Oh, I'm so glad—she's so splendid!" The girl looked away from Peter now, but not, though it seemed to fill the place, at the triumphant portrait of Miriam Rooth.

"I'm delighted you've come in. I *have* waited for you," Peter hastened to declare to Biddy, though he was conscious that this was under the circumstances meagre.

"Aren't you coming to see us again?"

"I'm in despair, but I shall really not have time. Therefore it's a blessing not to have missed you here."

"I'm very glad," said Biddy. Then she added: "And you're going to America—to stay a long time?"

"Till I'm sent to some better place."

"And will that better place be as far away?"

"Oh Biddy, it wouldn't be better then," said Peter.

"Do you mean they'll give you something to do at home?"

"Hardly that. But I've got a tremendous lot to do at home to-day." For the twentieth time Peter referred to his watch.

Biddy turned to her brother, who murmured to her: "You might bid me good morning." She kissed him, and he asked what the news might be in Calcutta Gardens; to which she replied:

"The only news is, of course, that, poor dears! they're making great preparations for Peter. Mamma thinks you must have had such a nasty dinner the other day," the girl continued, to the guest of that romantic occasion.

"Faithless Peter!" said Nick, beginning to whistle and to arrange a canvas in anticipation of Miriam's arrival.

"Dear Biddy, thank your stars you are not in my horrid profession," protested the personage thus designated. "One is bowled about like a cricket-ball, unable to answer for one's freedom or one's comfort from one moment to another."

"Oh, ours is the true profession—Biddy's and mine," Nick broke out, setting up his canvas; "the career of liberty and peace, of charming long mornings, spent in a still north light, in the contemplation, and I may even say in the company, of the amiable and the beautiful."

"That certainly is the case when Biddy comes to see you," Peter returned.

Biddy smiled at him. "I come every day. *Anch' io son pittore!* I encourage Nick awfully."

"It's a pity I'm not a martyr; she would bravely perish with me," Nick said.

"You are—you are a martyr—when people say such odious things!" the girl cried. "They do say them. I've heard many more than I've repeated to you."

"It's you yourself then, indignant and sympathetic, who are the martyr," observed Peter, who wanted greatly to be kind to her.

"Oh, I don't care!" she answered, colouring in response to this; and she continued, to Peter: "Don't you think one can do as much good by painting great works of art as by—as by what papa used to do? Don't you think art is necessary to the happiness, to the greatness of a people? Don't you think it's manly and honourable? Do you think a passion for it is a thing to be ashamed of? Don't you think the artist—the conscientious, the serious one—is as distinguished a member of society as any one else?"

Peter and Nick looked at each other and laughed at the way she had got up her subject, and Nick asked his visitor if she didn't express it all in perfection. "I delight in general

in artists, but I delight still more in their defenders," Peter jested, to Biddy.

"Ah, don't attack me, if you are wise," Nick said.

"One is tempted to, when it makes Biddy so fine."

"Well, that's the way she encourages me; it's meat and drink to me," Nick went on. "At the same time I'm bound to say there is a little whistling in the dark in it."

"In the dark?" his sister demanded.

"The obscurity, my dear child, of your own aspirations, your mysterious ambitions and plastic visions. Aren't there some heavyish shadows there?"

"Why, I never cared for politics."

"No, but you cared for life, you cared for society, and you have chosen the path of solitude and concentration."

"You horrid boy!" said Biddy.

"Give it up, that arduous steep—give it up and come out with me," Peter interposed.

"Come out with you?"

"Let us walk a little, or even drive a little. Let us at any rate talk a little."

"I thought you had so much to do," Biddy candidly objected.

"So I have, but why shouldn't you do a part of it with me? Would there be any harm? I'm going to some tiresome shops—you'll cheer the economical hour."

The girl hesitated; then she turned to Nick. "Would there be any harm?"

"Oh, it's none of *his* business!" Peter protested.

"He had better take you home to your mother."

"I'm going home—I sha'n't stay here to-day," said Biddy. Then to Peter: "I came in a hansom, but I shall walk back. Come that way with me."

"With singular pleasure. But I shall not be able to go in," Sherringham added.

"Oh, that's no matter," said Biddy. "Good-bye, Nick."

"You understand then that we dine together—at seven sharp. Wouldn't a club be best?" Peter, before going, inquired of Nick. He suggested further which club it should be; and his words led Biddy, who had directed her steps toward the door, to turn a moment, as if she were on the point of asking reproachfully whether it was for this Peter had given up Calcutta Gardens. But this impulse, if impulse it was, had no sequel except so far as it was a sequel that Peter spontaneously explained to her, after Nick had assented to his conditions, that her brother too had a desire to go to Miss Rooth's first night and had already promised to accompany him.

"Oh, that's perfect; it will be so good for him—won't it? if he's going to paint her again," Biddy responded.

"I think there's nothing so good for him as that he happens to have such a sister as you," Peter observed as they went out. As he spoke he heard outside the sound of a carriage stopping; and before Biddy, who was in front of him, opened the door of the house he had time to say to himself: "What a bore—there's Miriam!" The opened door showed him that he was right—this young lady was in the act of alighting from the brougham provided by Basil Dashwood's thrifty zeal. Her mother followed her, and both the new visitors

exclaimed and rejoiced, in their demonstrative way, as their eyes fell upon their valued friend. The door had closed behind Peter, but he instantly and violently rang, so that they should be admitted with as little delay as possible, while he remained slightly disconcerted by the prompt occurrence of an encounter he had sought to avert. It ministered moreover a little to this particular sensation that Miriam appeared to have come somewhat before her time. The incident promised however to pass off in the happiest way. Before he knew it both the ladies had taken possession of Biddy, who looked at them with comparative coldness, tempered indeed by a faint glow of apprehension, and Miriam had broken out:

"We know you, we know you; we saw you in Paris, and you came to my theatre a short time ago with Mr. Sherringham."

"We know your mother, Lady Agnes Dormer. I hope her ladyship is very well," said Mrs. Rooth, who had never struck Sherringham as a more objectionable old woman.

"You offered to do a head of me, or something or other: didn't you tell me you work in clay? I dare say you've forgotten all about it, but I should be delighted," Miriam pursued, with the richest urbanity.

Peter was not concerned with her mother's pervasiveness, though he didn't like Biddy to see even that; but he hoped his companion would take the overcharged benevolence of the young actress in the spirit in which, rather to his surprise, it evidently was offered.

"I've sat to your clever brother many times," said Miriam; "I'm going to sit again. I dare say you've seen what we've done—he's too delighful. *Si vous saviez comme cela me repose!*"

she added, turning for a moment to Sherringham. Then she continued, smiling, to Biddy: "Only he oughtn't to have thrown up such prospects, you know. I have an idea I wasn't nice to you that day in Paris—I was nervous and scared and perverse. I remember perfectly; I *was* odious. But I'm better now—you'd see if you were to know me. I'm not a bad girl—really I'm not. But you must have your own friends. Happy they—you look so charming! Immensely like Mr. Dormer, especially about the eyes; isn't she, mamma?"

"She comes of a beautiful Norman race—the finest, purest strain," the old woman simpered. "Mr. Dormer is sometimes so good as to come and see us—we are always at home on Sunday; and if some day you were so venturesome as to come with him you might perhaps find it pleasant, though very different of course from the circle in which you habitually move."

Biddy murmured a vague recognition of these wonderful civilities, and Miriam commented: "Different, yes; but we're all right, you know. Do come," she added. Then turning to Sherringham: "Remember what I told you—I don't expect you to-night."

"Oh, I understand; I shall come," Peter answered, growing red.

"It will be idiotic. Keep him, keep him away—don't let him," Miriam went on, to Biddy; with which, as Nick's portals now were gaping, she drew her mother away.

Peter at this walked off briskly with Biddy, dropping as he did so: "She's too fantastic!"

"Yes, but so tremendously good-looking. I shall ask Nick to take me there," the girl continued after a moment.

"Well, she'll do you no harm. They're all right, as she says. It's the world of art—you were standing up so for art just now."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking so much of that kind," said Biddy.

"There's only one kind—it's all the same thing. If one sort's good the other is."

Biddy walked along a moment. "Is she serious? Is she conscientious?"

"Oh, she has the makings of a great artist," said Peter.

"I'm glad to hear you think a woman can be one."

"In that line there has never been any doubt about it."

"And only in that line?"

"I mean on the stage in general, dramatic or lyric. It's as the actress that the woman produces the most complete and satisfactory artistic results."

"And only as the actress?"

"Yes, there's another art in which she's not bad."

"Which one do you mean?" asked Biddy.

"That of being charming and good and indispensable to man."

"Oh, that isn't an art."

"Then you leave her only the stage. Take it if you like in the widest sense."

Biddy appeared to reflect a moment, as if to see what sense this might be. But she found none that was wide enough, for she cried the next minute: "Do you mean to say there's nothing for a woman but to be an actress?"

"Never in my life. I only say that that's the best thing for a woman to be who finds herself irresistibly carried into the practice of the arts; for there her capacity for them has most application and her incapacity for them least. But at the same time I strongly recommend her not to be an artist if she can possibly help it. It's a devil of a life."

"Oh, I know; men want women not to be anything."

"It's a poor little refuge they try to take from the overwhelming consciousness that you are in fact everything."

"Everything? That's the kind of thing you say to keep us quiet."

"Dear Biddy, you see how well we succeed!" laughed Sherringham; to which the girl responded by inquiring irrelevantly:

"Why is it so necessary for you to go to the theatre to-night, if Miss Rooth doesn't want you to?"

"My dear child, she does. But that has nothing to do with it."

"Why then did she say that she doesn't?"

"Oh, because she meant just the contrary."

"Is she so false then—is she so vulgar?"

"She speaks a special language; practically it isn't false, because it renders her thought, and those who know her understand it."

"But she doesn't use it only to those who know her, since she asked me, who have so little the honour of her acquaintance, to keep you away to-night. How am I to know that she meant by that that I'm to urge you on to go?"

Sherringham was on the point of replying: "Because you

have my word for it;" but he shrank in fact from giving his word—he had some fine scruples—and endeavoured to get out of his embarrassment by a general tribute. "Dear Biddy, you're delightfully acute: you're quite as clever as Miss Rooth." He felt however that this was scarcely adequate, and he continued: "The truth is, its being important for me to go is a matter quite independent of that young lady's wishing it or not wishing it. There happens to be a definite, intrinsic propriety in it which determines the matter and which it would take me long to explain."

"I see. But fancy your 'explaining' to me: you make me feel so indiscreet!" the girl cried quickly—an exclamation which touched him because he was not aware that, quick as it had been, Biddy had still had time to be struck first (though she wouldn't for the world have expressed it) with the oddity of such a duty at such a time. In fact that oddity, during a silence of some minutes, came back to Peter himself: the note had been forced—it sounded almost ignobly frivolous for a man on the eve of proceeding to a high diplomatic post. The effect of this however was not to make him break out with: "Hang it, I *will* keep my engagement to your mother!" but to fill him with the wish that he could shorten his actual excursion by taking Biddy the rest of the way in a cab. He was uncomfortable, and there were hansoms about which he looked at wistfully. While he was so occupied his companion took up the talk by an abrupt interrogation.

"Why did she say that Nick oughtn't to have resigned his seat?"

"Oh, I don't know; it struck her so. It doesn't matter much."

"If she's an artist herself why doesn't she like people to go in for art, especially when Nick has given his time to painting her so beautifully? Why does she come there so often if she disapproves of what he has done?"

"Oh, Miriam's disapproval—it doesn't count; it's a manner of speaking."

"Of speaking untruths, do you mean? Does she think just the reverse—is that the way she talks about everything?"

"We always admire most what we can do least," Peter replied; "and Miriam of course isn't political. She ranks painters more or less with her own profession, about which already, new as she is to it, she has no illusions. They're all artists; it's the same general sort of thing. She prefers men of the world—men of action."

"Is that the reason she likes you?" Biddy mocked.

"Ah, she doesn't like me—couldn't you see it?"

Biddy said nothing for a moment; then she asked: "Is that why she lets you call her 'Miriam'?"

"Oh, I don't, to her face."

"Ah, only to mine!" laughed Biddy.

"One says that as one says 'Rachel' of her great predecessor."

"Except that she isn't so great quite yet, is she?"

"Far from it; she's the freshest of novices—she has scarcely been four months on the stage. But no novice has ever been such an adept. She'll go very fast, and I dare say that before long she'll be magnificent."

"What a pity you'll not see that!" Biddy remarked, after a short interval.

"Not see it?"

"If you're thousands of miles away."

"It *is* a pity," Peter said; "and since you mention it I don't mind frankly telling you—throwing myself on your mercy, as it were—that that's why I make such a point of a rare occasion like to-night. I've a weakness for the drama that, as you perhaps know, I've never concealed, and this impression will probably have to last me, in some barren spot, for many, many years."

"I understand—I understand. I hope therefore it will be charming." And Biddy walked faster.

"Just as some other charming impressions will have to last," Peter added, conscious of a certain effort that he was obliged to make to keep up with her. She seemed almost to be running away from him, a circumstance which led him to suggest, after they had proceeded a little further without more words, that if she were in a hurry they had perhaps better take a cab. Her face was strange and touching to him as she turned it to reply quickly:

"Oh, I'm not in the least in a hurry, and I think, really, I had better walk."

"We'll walk then, by all means!" Peter declared, with slightly exaggerated gaiety; in pursuance of which they went on a hundred yards. Biddy kept the same pace; yet it was scarcely a surprise to Sherringham that she should suddenly stop with the exclamation:

"After all, though I'm not in a hurry I'm tired! I had better have a cab; please call that one," she added, looking about her.

They were in a straight, black, ugly street, where the small,

cheap, gray-faced houses had no expression save that of a rueful, inconsolable consciousness of its want of identity. They would have constituted a "terrace" if they could, but they had given it up. Even a hansom which loitered across the end of the vista turned a sceptical back upon it, so that Sherringham had to lift his voice in a loud appeal. He stood with Biddy watching the cab approach them. "This is one of the charming things you'll remember," she said, turning her eyes to the general dreariness from the particular figure of the vehicle, which was antiquated and clumsy. Before he could reply she had lightly stepped into the cab; but as he answered: "Most assuredly it is," and prepared to follow her she quickly closed the apron.

"I must go alone; you've lots of things to do—it's all right;" and through the aperture in the roof she gave the driver her address. She had spoken with decision, and Peter recognized that she wished to get away from him. Her eyes betrayed it as well as her voice, in a look—not a hard one however—which as he stood there with his hand on the cab he had time to take from her. "Good-bye, Peter," she smiled; and as the cab began to rumble away he uttered the same tepid, ridiculous farewell.

XII.

When Miriam and her mother went into the studio Nick Dormer had stopped whistling, but he was still gay enough to receive them with every demonstration of sociability. He thought his studio a poor place, ungarnished, untapestried, a mere seat of rude industry, with all its revelations and honours still to come. But both his visitors smiled upon it a good deal in the same way in which they had smiled on Bridget Dormer when they met her at the door: Mrs. Rooth because vague, prudent approbation was the habit of her foolish little face—it was ever the least danger; and Miriam because apparently she was genuinely glad to find herself within the walls which she spoke of now as her asylum. She broke out in this strain to her host almost as soon as she had crossed the threshold, commending his circumstances, his conditions of work as infinitely happier than her own. He was quiet, independent, absolute, free to do what he liked as he liked it, shut up in his little temple with his altar and his divinity; not hustled about in a mob of people, having to posture and grin to pit and gallery, to square himself at every step with insufferable conventions and with the ignorance and vanity of others. He was blissfully alone.

"Mercy, how you do abuse your fine profession! I'm sure

I never urged you to adopt it!" Mrs. Rooth cried, in real bewilderment, to her daughter.

"She was abusing mine still more, the other day," joked Nick—"telling me I ought to be ashamed of it and of myself."

"Oh, I never know from one moment to the other—I live with my heart in my mouth," sighed the old woman.

"Aren't you quiet about the great thing—about my behaviour?" Miriam smiled. "My only extravagances are intellectual."

"I don't know what you call your behaviour."

"You would very soon if it were not what it is."

"And I don't know what you call intellectual," grumbled Mrs. Rooth.

"Yes, but I don't see very well how I could make you understand that. At any rate," Miriam went on, looking at Nick, "I retract what I said the other day about Mr. Dormer. I've no wish to quarrel with him about the way he has determined to dispose of his life, because after all it does suit me very well. It rests me, this little devoted corner; oh, it rests me. It's out of the tussle and the heat, it's deliciously still, and they can't get at me. Ah, when art's like this, *à la bonne heure!*" And she looked round on such a presentment of "art" with a splendid air that made Nick burst out laughing at its contrast with the humble fact. Miriam smiled at him as if she liked to be the cause of his mirth, and went on appealing to him: "You'll always let me come here for an hour, won't you, to take breath—to let the whirlwind pass? You needn't trouble yourself about me;

I don't mean to impose on you in the least the necessity of painting me, though if that's a manner of helping you to get on you may be sure it will always be open to you. Do what you like with me in that respect; only let me sit here on a high stool, keeping well out of your way, and see what you happen to be doing. I'll tell you my own adventures when you want to hear them."

"The fewer adventures you have to tell, the better, my dear," said Mrs. Rooth; "and if Mr. Dormer keeps you quiet he will add ten years to my life."

"This is an interesting comment on Mr. Dormer's own quietus, on his independence and sweet solitude," Nick observed. "Miss Rooth has to work with others, which is after all only what Mr. Dormer has to do when he works with Miss Rooth. What do you make of the inevitable sitter?"

"Oh," answered Miriam, "you can say to the sitter: 'Hold your tongue, you brute!'"

"Isn't it a good deal in that manner that I've heard you address your comrades at the theatre?" asked Mrs. Rooth. "That's why my heart's in my mouth."

"Yes, but they hit me back; they reply to me—*comme de raison*—as I should never think of replying to Mr. Dormer. It's a great advantage to him that when he's peremptory with his model it only makes her better, adds to her expression of gloomy grandeur."

"We did the gloomy grandeur in the other picture; suppose therefore we try something different in this," suggested Nick.

"It *is* serious, it *is* grand," murmured Mrs. Rooth, who had taken up a rapt attitude before the portrait of her daughter. "It makes one wonder what she's thinking of. Beautiful, commendable things—that's what it seems to say."

"What can I be thinking of but the tremendous wisdom of my mother?" Miriam inquired. "I brought her this morning to see that thing—she had only seen it in its earliest stage—and not to presume to advise you about anything else you may be so good as to embark on. She wanted, or she professed that she wanted, terribly to know what you had finally arrived at. She was too impatient to wait till you should send it home."

"Ah, send it home—send it home; let us have it always with us!" Mrs. Rooth urged. "It will hold us up; it will keep us on the heights, near the stars—be always for us a symbol and a reminder!"

"You see I was right," Miriam went on; "for she appreciates thoroughly, in her own way, and understands. But if she worries or distracts you I'll send her directly home—I've kept the carriage there on purpose. I must add that I don't feel quite safe to-day in letting her out of my sight. She's liable to make dashes at the theatre and play unconscionable tricks there. I shall never again accuse mamma of a want of interest in my profession. Her interest to-day exceeds even my own. She's all over the place and she has ideas; ah, but ideas! She's capable of turning up at the theatre at five o'clock this afternoon and demanding that the scenery of the third act be repainted. For myself, I've not a word more to say on the subject—I've accepted the situation. Everything

is no doubt wrong; but nothing can possibly be right. Let us eat and drink, for to-night we die. If you like, mamma shall go and sit in the carriage, and as there's no means of fastening the doors (is there?) your servant shall keep guard over her."

"Just as you are now—be so good as to remain so; sitting just that way—leaning back, with a smile in your eyes and one hand on the sofa beside you, supporting you a little. I shall stick a flower into the other hand—let it lie in your lap, just as it is. Keep that thing on your head—it's admirably uncovered: do you call the construction a bonnet? —and let your head fall back a little. There it is—it's found. This time I shall really do something, and it will be as different as you like from that crazy job. *Pazienza!*" It was in these irrelevant but earnest words that Nick responded to his sitter's uttered vagaries, of which her charming tone and countenance diminished the superficial acerbity. He held up his hands a moment, to fix her in her limits, and a few minutes afterwards had a happy sense of having begun to work.

"The smile in her eyes—don't forget the smile in her eyes!" Mrs. Rooth exclaimed softly, turning away and creeping about the room. "That will make it so different from the other picture and show the two sides of her genius, with the wonderful range between them. It will be a magnificent pendant; and though I dare say I shall strike you as greedy, you must let me hope you will send it home too."

Mrs. Rooth explored the place discreetly, on tiptoe, gossiping as she went and bending her head and her eyeglass over

various objects with an air of imperfect comprehension which did not prevent Nick from being reminded of the story of her underhand commercial habits told by Gabriel Nash at the exhibition in Paris, the first time her name had fallen on his ear. A queer old woman from whom, if you approached her in the right way, you could buy old pots—it was in this character that she had originally been introduced to him. He had lost sight of it afterwards, but it revived again as his observant eyes, at the same time that they followed his active hand, became aware of her instinctive appraising gestures. There was a moment when he laughed out gaily—there was so little in his poor studio to appraise. Mrs. Rooth's vague, polite, disappointed bent back and head made a subject, the subject of a sketch, in an instant: they gave such a sudden pictorial glimpse of the element of race. He found himself seeing the immemorial Jewess in her, holding up a candle in a crammed back-shop. There was no candle indeed, and his studio was not crammed, and it had never occurred to him before that she was of Hebrew strain, except on the general theory, held with pertinacity by several clever people, that most of us are more or less so. The late Rudolf Roth had been, and his daughter was visibly her father's child; so that, flanked by such a pair, good Semitic reasons were surely not wanting to the mother. Receiving Miriam's little satiric shower without shaking her shoulders, she might at any rate have been the descendant of a tribe long persecuted. Her blandness was imperturbable—she professed that she would be as still as a mouse. Miriam, on the other side of the room, in the tranquil beauty of her attitude (it was "found" indeed,

as Nick had said), watched her a little and then exclaimed that she wished she had locked her up at home. Putting aside her humorous account of the dangers to which she was exposed from her mother, it was not whimsical to imagine that, within the limits of that repose from which the Neville-Nugents never wholly departed, Mrs. Rooth might indeed be a trifle fidgety and have something on her mind. Nick presently mentioned that it would not be possible for him to "send home" this second performance; and he added, in the exuberance of having already got a little into relation with his work, that perhaps that didn't matter, inasmuch as—if Miriam would give him his time, to say nothing of her own—a third masterpiece might also some day very well come off. His model rose to this without conditions, assuring him that he might count upon her till she grew too old and too ugly and that nothing would make her so happy as that he should paint her as often as Romney had painted the celebrated Lady Hamilton. "Ah, Lady Hamilton!" deprecated Mrs. Rooth; while Miriam, who had on occasion the candour of a fine acquisitiveness, inquired what particular reason there might be for his not letting them have the picture he was now beginning.

"Why, I've promised it to Peter Sherringham—he has offered me money for it," Nick replied. "However, he's welcome to it for nothing, poor fellow, and I shall be delighted to do the best I can for him."

Mrs. Rooth, still prowling, stopped in the middle of the room at this, and Miriam exclaimed: "He offered you money—just as we came in?"

"You met him, then, at the door, with my sister? I supposed you had—he's taking her home," said Nick.

"Your sister's a lovely girl—such an aristocratic type!" breathed Mrs. Rooth. Then she added: "I've a tremendous confession to make to you."

"Mamma's confessions have to be tremendous to correspond with her crimes," said Miriam. "She asked Miss Dormer to come and see us—suggested even that you might bring her some Sunday. I don't like the way mamma does such things—too much humility, too many *simagrées*, after all; but I also said what I could to be nice to her. Your sister *is* charming—awfully pretty and modest. If you were to press me I should tell you frankly that it seems to me rather a social muddle, this rubbing shoulders of 'nice girls' and *filles de théâtre;* I shouldn't think it would do your young ladies much good. However, it's their own affair, and no doubt there's no more need of their thinking we're worse than we are than of their thinking we're better. The people they live with don't seem to know the difference—I sometimes make my reflections about the public one works for."

"Ah, if you go in for the public's knowing differences you're far too particular," Nick laughed. "*D'où tombez-vous?* as you affected French people say. If you have anything at stake on that, you had simply better not play."

"Dear Mr. Dormer, don't encourage her to be so dreadful; for it *is* dreadful, the way she talks," Mrs. Rooth broke in. "One would think we were not respectable—one would think I had never known what I have known and been what I have been."

"What one would think, beloved mother, is that you are a still greater humbug than you are. It's you, on the contrary, who go down on your knees, who pour forth apologies about our being vagabonds."

"Vagabonds—listen to her!—after the education I've given her and our magnificent prospects!" wailed Mrs. Rooth, sinking, with clasped hands, upon the nearest ottoman.

"Not after our prospects, if prospects they are: a good deal before them. Yes, you've taught me tongues, and I'm greatly obliged to you—they no doubt impart variety, as well as incoherency, to my conversation; and that of people in our line is for the most part notoriously monotonous and shoppy. The gift of tongues is in general the sign of your genuine adventurer. Dear mamma, I've no low standard—that's the last thing," Miriam went on. "My weakness is my exalted conception of respectability. Ah, *parlez-moi de ça* and of the way I understand it! Oh, if I were to go in for being respectable you'd see something fine. I'm awfully conservative and I know what respectability is, even when I meet people of society on the accidental middle ground of glowering or smirking. I know also what it isn't—it isn't the sweet union of little girls and actresses. I should carry it much further than any of these people: I should never look at the likes of us! Every hour I live I see that the wisdom of the ages was in the experience of dear old Madame Carré—was in a hundred things she told me. She's founded a rock. After that," Miriam went on, to her host, "I can assure you that if you were so good as to bring Miss Dormer to see us we

should be angelically careful of her and surround her with every attention and precaution."

"The likes of us—the likes of us!" Mrs. Rooth repeated plaintively, with ineffectual, theoretical resentment. "I don't know what you are talking about, and I decline to be turned upside down. I have my ideas as well as you, and I repudiate the charge of false humility. I've been through too many troubles to be proud, and a pleasant, polite manner was the rule of my life even in the days when, God knows, I had everything. I've never changed, and if, with God's help, I had a civil tongue then, I have a civil tongue now. It's more than you always have, my poor perverse and passionate child. Once a lady always a lady—all the footlights in the world, turn them up as high as you will, won't make a difference. And I think people know it, people who know anything (if I may use such an expression), and it's because they know it that I'm not afraid to address them courteously. And I must say—and I call Mr. Dormer to witness, for if he could reason with you a bit about it he might render several people a service—your conduct to Mr. Sherringham simply breaks my heart," Mrs. Rooth concluded, with a jump of several steps in the fine modern avenue of her argument.

Nick was appealed to, but he hesitated a moment, and while he hesitated Miriam remarked: "Mother is good—mother is very good; but it is only little by little that you discover how good she is." This seemed to leave Nick free to ask Mrs. Rooth, with the preliminary intimation that what she had just said was very striking, what she meant by her daughter's conduct to Peter Sherringham. Before Mrs. Rooth could answer

this question, however, Miriam interposed irrelevantly with one of her own. "Do you mind telling me if you made your sister go off with Mr. Sherringham because you knew it was about time for me to turn up? Poor Mr. Dormer, I get you into trouble, don't I?" she added sympathetically.

"Into trouble?" echoed Nick, looking at her head but not at her eyes.

"Well, we won't talk about that!" Miriam exclaimed, with a rich laugh.

Nick now hastened to say that he had nothing to do with his sister's leaving the studio—she had only come, as it happened, for a moment. She had walked away with Peter Sherringham because they were cousins and old friends: he was to leave England immediately, for a long time, and he had offered her his company going home. Mrs. Rooth shook her head very knowingly over the "long time" that Mr. Sherringham would be absent—she plainly had her ideas about that; and she conscientiously related that in the course of the short conversation they had all had at the door of the house her daughter had reminded Miss Dormer of something that had passed between them in Paris in regard to the charming young lady's modelling her head.

"I did it to make the question of our meeting less absurd—to put it on the footing of our both being artists. I don't ask you if she has talent," said Miriam.

"Then I needn't tell you," answered Nick.

"I'm sure she has talent and a very refined inspiration. I see something in that corner, covered with a mysterious veil," Mrs. Rooth insinuated; which led Miriam to ask immediately:

"Has she been trying her hand at Mr. Sherringham?"

"When should she try her hand, poor dear young lady? He's always sitting with us," said Mrs. Rooth.

"Dear mamma, you exaggerate. He has his moments, when he seems to say his prayers to me; but we've had some success in cutting them down. *Il s'est bien détaché ces-jours-ci*, and I'm very happy for him. Of course it's an impertinent allusion for me to make; but I should be so delighted if I could think of him as a little in love with Miss Dormer," the girl pursued, addressing Nick.

"He is, I think, just a little—just a tiny bit," said Nick, working away; while Mrs. Rooth ejaculated, to her daughter, simultaneously:

"How can you ask such fantastic questions when you know that he's dying for you?"

"Oh, dying!—he's dying very hard!" cried Miriam. "Mr. Sherringham's a man of whom I can't speak with too much esteem and affection, who may be destined to perish by some horrid fever (which God forbid!) in the unpleasant country he's going to. But he won't have caught his fever from your humble servant."

"You may kill him even while you remain in perfect health yourself," said Nick; "and since we're talking of the matter I don't see the harm in my confessing that he strikes me as bad—oh, as very bad indeed."

"And yet he's in love with your sister?—*je n'y suis plus.*"

"He tries to be, for he sees that as regards you there are difficulties. He would like to put his hand on some nice girl who would be an antidote to his poison."

"Difficulties are a mild name for them; poison even is a mild name for the ill he suffers from. The principal difficulty is that he doesn't know what he wants. The next is that I don't either—or what I want myself. I only know what I don't want," said Miriam brightly, as if she were uttering some happy, beneficent truth. "I don't want a person who takes things even less simply than I do myself. Mr. Sherringham, poor man, must be very uncomfortable, for one side of him is perpetually fighting against the other side. He's trying to serve God and Mammon, and I don't know how God will come off. What I like in you is that you have definitely let Mammon go—it's the only way. That's my earnest conviction, and yet they call us people light. Poor Mr. Sherringham has tremendous ambitions—tremendous *riguardi*, as we used to say in Italy. He wants to enjoy every comfort and to save every appearance, and all without making a sacrifice. He expects others—me, for instance—to make all the sacrifices. *Merci*, much as I esteem him and much as I owe him! I don't know how he ever came to stray at all into our bold, bad Bohemia: it was a cruel trick for fortune to play him. He can't keep out of it, he's perpetually making dashes across the border, and yet he's not in the least at home there. There's another in whose position (if I were in it) I wouldn't look at the likes of us!"

"I don't know much about the matter, but I have an idea Peter thinks he has made, or at least is making, sacrifices."

"So much the better—you must encourage him, you must help him."

"I don't know what my daughter's talking about—she's

much too clever for me," Mrs. Rooth put in. "But there's one way you can encourage Mr. Sherringham—there's one way you can help him; and perhaps it won't make it any worse for a gentleman of your good-nature that it will help me at the same time. Can't I look to you, dear Mr. Dormer, to see that he does come to the theatre to-night—that he doesn't feel himself obliged to stay away?"

"What danger is there of his staying away?" Nick asked.

"If he's bent on sacrifices, that's a very good one to begin with," Miriam observed.

"That's the mad, bad way she talks to him—she has forbidden the dear unhappy gentleman the house!" her mother cried. "She brought it up to him just now, at the door, before Miss Dormer: such very odd form! She pretends to impose her commands upon him."

"Oh, he'll be there—we're going to dine together," said Nick. And when Miriam asked him what that had to do with it he went on: "Why, we've arranged it; I'm going, and he won't let me go alone."

"You're going? I sent you no places," Miriam objected.

"Yes, but I've got one. Why didn't you, after all I've done for you?"

She hesitated a moment. "Because I'm so good. No matter," she added: "if Mr. Sherringham comes I won't act."

"Won't you act for me?"

"She'll act like an angel," Mrs. Rooth protested. "She might do, she might be anything in the world; but she won't take common pains."

"Of one thing there's no doubt," said Miriam: "that compared with the rest of us—poor passionless creatures—mamma does know what she wants."

"And what is that?" inquired Nick, chalking away.

"She wants everything."

"Never, never—I'm much more humble," retorted the old woman; upon which her daughter requested her to give then to Mr. Dormer, who was a reasonable man and an excellent judge, a general idea of the scope of her desires.

As however, Mrs. Rooth, sighing and deprecating, was not quick to comply with the injunction, the girl attempted a short cut to the truth with the abrupt inquiry: "Do you believe for a single moment he'd marry me?"

"Why he has proposed to you—you've told me yourself—a dozen times."

"Proposed what to me? I've told you that neither a dozen times nor once, because I've never understood. He has made wonderful speeches, but he has never been serious."

"You told me he had been in the seventh heaven of devotion, especially that night we went to the foyer of the Français," Mrs. Rooth insisted.

"Do you call the seventh heaven of devotion serious? He's in love with me—*je veux bien;* he's so poisoned, as Mr. Dormer vividly says, as to require an antidote; but he has never spoken to me as if he really expected me to listen to him, and he's the more of a gentleman from that fact. He knows we haven't a common ground—that a grasshopper can't mate with a fish. So he has taken care to say to me only more than he can possibly mean. That makes it just nothing."

"Did he say more than he can possibly mean when he took formal leave of you yesterday—forever and ever?"

"Pray don't you call that a sacrifice?" Nick asked.

"Oh, he took it all back, his sacrifice, before he left the house."

"Then has *that* no meaning?" demanded Mrs. Rooth.

"None that I can make out."

"Oh, I've no patience with you: you can be stupid when you will as well as clever when you will!" the old woman groaned.

"What mamma wishes me to understand and to practise is the particular way to be clever with Mr. Sherringham," said Miriam. "There are doubtless depths of wisdom and virtue in it. But I can only see one way; namely, to be perfectly honest."

"I like to hear you talk—it makes you live, brings you out," Nick mentioned. "And you sit beautifully still. All I want to say is, please continue to do so; remain exactly as you are—it's rather important—for the next ten minutes."

"We're washing our dirty linen before you, but it's all right," Miriam answered, "because it shows you what sort of people we are, and that's what you need to know. Don't make me vague and arranged and fine, in this new thing," she continued: "make me characteristic and real; make life, with all its horrid facts and truths, stick out of me. I wish you could put mother in too; make us live there side by side and tell our little story. 'The wonderful actress and her still more wonderful mamma'—don't you think that's an awfully good subject?"

Mrs. Rooth, at this, cried shame on her daughter's wanton

humours, professing that she herself would never accept so much from Nick's good-nature, and Miriam settled it that at any rate he was some day and in some way to do her mother and sail very near the wind.

"She doesn't believe he wants to marry me, any more than you do," the girl, taking up her dispute again after a moment, represented to Nick; "but she believes—how indeed can I tell you what she believes?—that I can work it (that's about it), so that in the fullness of time I shall hold him in a vise. I'm to keep him along for the present, but not to listen to him, for if I listen to him I shall lose him. It's ingenious, it's complicated; but I dare say you follow me."

"Don't move—don't move," said Nick. "Excuse a beginner."

"No, I shall explain quietly. Somehow (here it's *very* complicated and you mustn't lose the thread), I shall be an actress and make a tremendous lot of money, and somehow, too (I suppose a little later), I shall become an ambassadress and be the favourite of courts. So you see it will all be delightful. Only I shall have to go straight! Mamma reminds me of a story I once heard about the mother of a young lady who was in receipt of much civility from the pretender to a crown, which indeed he, and the young lady too, afterwards more or less wore. The old countess watched the course of events and gave her daughter the cleverest advice: '*Tiens bon, ma fille*, and you shall sit upon a throne.' Mamma wishes me to *tenir bon* (she apparently thinks there's a danger I may not), so that if I don't sit upon a throne I shall at least parade at the foot of one. And if before that for ten

years I pile up the money they'll forgive me the way I've made it. I should hope so, if I've *tenu bon!* Only ten years is a good while to hold out, isn't it? If it isn't Mr. Sherringham it will be some one else. Mr. Sherringham has the great merit of being a bird in the hand. I'm to keep him along, I'm to be still more diplomatic than even he can be."

Mrs. Rooth listened to her daughter with an air of assumed reprobation which melted, before the girl had done, into a diverted, complacent smile—the gratification of finding herself the proprietress of so much wit and irony and grace. Miriam's account of her mother's views was a scene of comedy, and there was instinctive art in the way she added touch to touch and made point upon point. She was so quiet, to oblige her painter, that only her fine lips moved—all her expression was in their charming utterance. Mrs. Rooth, after the first flutter of a less cynical spirit, consented to be sacrificed to an effect of an order she had now been educated to recognize; so that she hesitated only for a moment, when Miriam had ceased speaking, before she broke out endearingly with a little titter and "*Comédienne!*" She looked at Nick Dormer as if to say: "Ain't she fascinating? That's the way she does for you!"

"It's rather cruel, isn't it," said Miriam, "to deprive people of the luxury of calling one an actress as they'd call one a liar? I represent, but I represent truly."

"Mr. Sherringham would marry you to-morrow—there's no question of ten years!" cried Mrs. Rooth, with a comicality of plainness.

Miriam smiled at Nick, appealing for a sort of pity for her

mother. "Isn't it droll, the way she can't get it out of her head?" Then turning almost coaxingly to the old woman: "*Voyons*, look about you: they don't marry us like that."

"But they do—*cela se voit tous les jours*. Ask Mr. Dormer."

"Oh, never!" said Miriam: "it would be as if I asked him to give us a practical illustration."

"I shall never give any illustration of matrimony; for me that question's over," said Nick.

Miriam rested kind eyes on him. "Dear me, how you must hate me!" And before he had time to reply she went on, to her mother: "People marry them to make them leave the stage; which proves exactly what I say."

"Ah, they offer them the finest positions," reasoned Mrs. Rooth.

"Do you want me to leave it then?"

"Oh, you can manage if you will!"

"The only managing I know anything about is to do my work. If I manage that, I shall pull through."

"But, dearest, may our work not be of many sorts?"

"I only know one," said Miriam.

At this Mrs. Rooth got up with a sigh. "I see you do wish to drive me into the street."

"Mamma's bewildered—there are so many paths she wants to follow, there are so many bundles of hay. As I told you, she wishes to gobble them all," Miriam went on. Then she added: "Yes, go and take the carriage; take a turn round the Park—you always delight in that—and come back for me in an hour."

"I'm too vexed with you; the air will do me good," said

Mrs. Rooth. But before she went she added, to Nick: "I have your assurance that you will bring him then to-night?"

"Bring Peter? I don't think I shall have to drag him," said Nick. "But you must do me the justice to remember that if I should resort to force I should do something that's not particularly in my interest—I should be magnanimous."

"We must always be that, mustn't we?" moralized Mrs. Rooth.

"How could it affect your interest?" Miriam inquired, less abstractly, of Nick.

"Yes, as you say," her mother reminded him, "the question of marriage has ceased to exist for you."

"Mamma goes straight at it!" laughed the girl, getting up while Nick rubbed his canvas before answering. Miriam went to Mrs. Rooth and settled her bonnet and mantle in preparation for her drive; then stood for a moment with a filial arm about her, as if they were waiting for their host's explanation. This however when it came halted visibly.

"Why, you said awhile ago that if Peter was there you wouldn't act."

"I'll act for *him*," smiled Miriam, encircling her mother.

"It doesn't matter whom it's for!" Mrs. Rooth declared sagaciously.

"Take your drive and relax your mind," said the girl, kissing her. "Come for me in an hour; not later, but not sooner." She went with her to the door, bundled her out, closed it behind her and came back to the position she had quitted. "*This* is the peace I want!" she exclaimed, with relief, as she settled into it.

XIII.

Peter Sherringham said so little during the performance that his companion was struck by his dumbness, especially as Miriam's acting seemed to Nick Dormer magnificent. He held his breath while she was on the stage—she gave the whole thing, including the spectator's emotion, such a lift. She had not carried out her fantastic menace of not exerting herself, and, as Mrs. Rooth had said, it little mattered for whom she acted. Nick was conscious as he watched her that she went through it all for herself, for the idea that possessed her and that she rendered with extraordinary breadth. She could not open the door a part of the way to it and let it simply peep in; if it entered at all it must enter in full procession and occupy the premises in state.

This was what had happened on an occasion which, as Nick noted in his stall, grew larger with each throb of the responsive house; till by the time the play was half over it appeared to stretch out wide arms to the future. Nick had often heard more applause but he had never heard more attention; for they were all charmed and hushed together and success seemed to be sitting down with them. There had been of course plenty of announcement—the newspapers had abounded and the arts of the manager had taken the freest license; but

it was easy to feel a fine universal consensus and to recognize the intrinsic buoyancy of the evening. People snatched their eyes from the stage for an instant to look at each other, and a sense of intelligence deepened and spread. It was a part of the impression that the actress was only now really showing, for this time she had verse to deal with and she made it unexpectedly exquisite. She was beauty, she was music, she was truth; she was passion and persuasion and tenderness. She caught up the obstreperous play in soothing, entwining arms and carried it into the high places of poetry, of style. And she had such tones of nature, such concealments of art, such effusions of life, that the whole scene glowed with the colour she communicated, and the house, as if pervaded with rosy fire, glowed back at the scene. Nick looked round in the intervals; he felt excited and flushed—the night had turned into a feast of fraternity and he expected to see people embrace each other. The crowd, the flutter, the triumph, the surprise, the signals and rumours, the heated air, his associates, near him, pointing out other figures, who presumably were celebrated but whom he had never heard of, all amused him and banished every impulse of criticism. Miriam was as satisfactory as some right sensation—she would feed the memory with the ineffaceable.

One of the things that amused Nick, or at least helped to fill his attention, was Peter's attitude, which apparently did not exclude criticism; rather indeed mainly implied it. Sherringham never took his eyes off the actress, but he made no remark about her and he never stirred out of his chair. Nick had from the first a plan of going round to speak to

her, but as his companion evidently meant not to move he felt a delicacy in regard to being more forward. During their brief dinner together (they made a rigid point of not being late), Peter had been silent and irremediably serious, but also, his kinsman judged, full of the wish to make it plain that he was calm. In his seat he was calmer than ever; had an air even of trying to suggest to Nick that his attendance, preoccupied as he was with deeper solemnities, was slightly mechanical, the result of a conception of duty, a habit of courtesy. When during a scene in the second act—a scene from which Miriam was absent—Nick observed to him that from his inexpressiveness one might gather he was not pleased, he replied after a moment: "I've been looking for her mistakes." And when Nick rejoined to this that he certainly wouldn't find them he said again, in an odd tone: "No, I sha'n't find them—I sh'a'nt find them." It might have seemed that since the girl's performance was a dazzling success he regarded his evening as rather a failure.

After the third act Nick said candidly: "My dear fellow, how can you sit here? Aren't you going to speak to her?"

To which Peter replied inscrutably: "Lord, no, never again; I bade her good-bye yesterday. She knows what I think of her form. It's very good, but she carries it a little too far. Besides, she didn't want me to come, and it's therefore more discreet to keep away from her."

"Surely it isn't an hour for discretion!" cried Nick. "Excuse me, at any rate, for five minutes."

He went behind and reappeared only as the curtain was rising on the fourth act; and in the interval between the

fourth and the fifth he went again for a shorter time. Peter was personally detached, but he consented to listen to his companion's vivid account of the state of things on the stage, where the elation of victory had made every one merry. The strain was over, the ship was in port, and they were all wiping their faces and grinning. Miriam—yes, positively—was grinning too, and she hadn't asked a question about Peter nor sent him a message. They were kissing all round and dancing for joy. They were on the eve, worse luck, of a tremendous run. Peter groaned, irrepressibly, at this; it was, save for a slight manifestation a moment later, the only sign of emotion that Nick's report elicited from him. There was but one voice of regret that they hadn't put on the piece earlier, as the end of the season would interrupt the run. There was but one voice too about the fourth act—it was believed that all London would rush to see the fourth act. There was a wonderful lot of people, and Miriam was charming; she was receiving there, in the ugly place, like a kind of royalty, with a smile and a word for each. She was like a young queen on her accession. When she saw him, Nick, she had kissed her hand to him over the heads of the courtiers. Nick's artless comment on this was that she had such pretty manners. It made Sherringham laugh, apparently at his companion's conception of the manners of a young queen. Mrs. Rooth, with a dozen shawls on her arm, was as red as a turkey; but you couldn't tell whether Miriam was red or pale: she was so cleverly, awfully cleverly, painted—perhaps a little too much. Dashwood of course was greatly to the fore, but you didn't have to mention his own performance to

him: he was magnanimous and would use nothing but the feminine pronoun. He didn't say much, indeed, but he evidently had ideas; he nodded significant things and whistled inimitable sounds—"heuh, heuh!" He was perfectly satisfied; moreover he looked further ahead than any one.

It was on coming back to his place after the fourth act that Nick put in, for Sherringham's benefit, most of these touches in his sketch of the situation. If Peter had continued to look for Miriam's mistakes he had not yet found them: the fourth act, bristling with dangers, putting a premium on every sort of cheap effect, had rounded itself without a flaw. Sitting there alone while Nick was away he had leisure to meditate on the wonder of this—on the art with which the girl had separated passion from violence, filling the whole place and never screaming; for it had seemed to him in London sometimes of old that the yell of theatrical emotion rang through the shrinking night like a fatal warning. Miriam had never been more present to him than at this hour; but she was inextricably transmuted—present essentially as the romantic heroine she represented. His state of mind was of the strangest, and he was conscious of its strangeness; just as he was conscious, in his person, of a cessation of resistance which identified itself absurdly with liberation. He felt weak at the same time that he felt excited, and he felt excited at the same time that he knew or believed he knew that his face was a blank. He saw things as a shining confusion, and yet somehow something monstrously definite kept surging out of them. Miriam was a beautiful, actual, fictive, impossible young woman, of a past age and undiscoverable country, who

spoke in blank verse and overflowed with metaphor, who was exalted and heroic beyond all human convenience, and who yet was irresistibly real and related to one's own affairs. But that reality was a part of her spectator's joy, and she was not changed back to the common by his perception of the magnificent trick of art with which it was connected. Before Nick Dormer rejoined him Sherringham, taking a visiting-card from his pocket, wrote on it in pencil a few words in a foreign tongue; but as at that moment he saw Nick coming in he immediately put it out of view.

The last thing before the curtain rose on the fifth act Nick mentioned that he had brought him a message from Basil Dashwood, who hoped they both, on leaving the theatre, would come to supper with him, in company with Miriam and her mother and several others: he had prepared a little informal banquet in honour of so famous a night. At this, while the curtain was rising, Peter immediately took out his card again and added something—he wrote the finest small hand you could see. Nick asked him what he was doing, and after an hesitation he replied:

"It's a word to say I can't come."

"To Dashwood? Oh, I shall go," said Nick.

"Well, I hope you'll enjoy it!" his companion replied in a tone which came back to him afterwards.

When the curtain fell on the last act the people stayed, standing up in their places for the most part. The applause shook the house—the recall became a clamour, the relief from a long tension. This was a moment, in any performance, that Sherringham detested, but he stood for an instant beside

Nick, who clapped like a school-boy. There was a veritable roar and the curtain drew back at the side most removed from them. Sherringham could see that Basil Dashwood was holding it, making a passage for the male "juvenile lead," who had Miriam in tow. Nick redoubled his efforts; heard the plaudits swell; saw the bows of the leading gentleman, who was hot and fat; saw Miriam, personally conducted and closer to the footlights, grow brighter and bigger and more swaying; and then became aware that Sherringham had with extreme agility slipped out of the stalls. Nick had already lost sight of him—he had apparently taken but a minute to escape from the house. Nick wondered at his quitting him without a farewell, if he was to leave England on the morrow and they were not to meet at the hospitable Dashwood's. He wondered even what Peter was "up to," since, as he had assured him, there was no question of his going round to Miriam. He waited to see this young lady reappear three times, dragging Dashwood behind her at the second with a friendly arm, to whom, in turn, was hooked Miss Fanny Rover, the actress entrusted, in the piece, with the inevitable comic relief. He went out slowly, with the crowd, and at the door looked again for Peter, who struck him as deficient for once in finish. He couldn't know that, in another direction and while he was helping the house to "rise" at Miriam, his kinsman had been particularly explicit.

On reaching the lobby Sherringham had pounced upon a small boy in buttons, who appeared to be superfluously connected with a desolate refreshment-room and was peeping, on tiptoe, at the stage, through the glazed hole in the door

of a box. Into one of the child's hands he thrust the card he had drawn again from his waistcoat, and into the other the largest silver coin he could find in the same receptacle, while he bent over him with words of adjuration—words which the little page tried to help himself to apprehend by instantly attempting to peruse the other words written on the card.

"That's no use—it's Italian," said Peter; "only carry it round to Miss Rooth without a minute's delay. Place it in her hand and she'll give you some object—a bracelet, a glove or a flower—to bring me back as a sign that she has received it. I shall be outside; bring me there what she gives you and you shall have another shilling—only fly!"

Sherringham's small messenger sounded him a moment with the sharp face of London wage-earning, and still more of London tip-earning, infancy, and vanished as swiftly as a slave of the Arabian Nights. While his patron waited in the lobby the audience began to pour out, and before the urchin had come back to him Peter was clapped on the shoulder by Nick Dormer.

"I'm glad I haven't lost you," said Nick; "but why didn't you stay to give her a hand?"

"Give her a hand? I hated it."

"My dear fellow, I don't follow you," Nick rejoined. "If you won't come to Dashwood's supper I fear our ways don't lie together."

"Thank him very much; say I have to get up at an unnatural hour." To this Peter added: "I think I ought to tell you she may not be there."

"Miss Rooth? Why, it's for her."

"I'm waiting for a word from her—she may change her mind."

Nick stared at his companion. "For you? Why, what have you proposed?"

"I've proposed marriage," said Peter in a strange voice.

"I say—!" Nick broke out; and at the same moment Peter's messenger squeezed through the press and stood before him.

"She has given me nothing, sir," the boy announced; "but she says I'm to say 'All right!'"

Nick marvelled a moment. "You've proposed through *him?*"

"Ay, and she accepts. Good-night!" Peter exclaimed; and, turning away, he bounded into a hansom. He said something to the driver through the roof, and Nick's eyes followed the cab as it started off. Nick was mystified, was even amused; especially when the youth in buttons, planted there and wondering too, remarked to him:

"Please, sir, he told me he'd give me a shilling, and he've forgot it."

"Oh, I can't pay you for *that!*" Nick laughed. He was vexed about the supper.

XIV.

Peter Sherringham rolled away through the summer night to St. John's Wood. He had put the pressure of strong words upon Miriam, entreating her to drive home immediately, without any one, without even her mother. He wished to see her alone, for a purpose that he would fully and satisfactorily explain—couldn't she trust him? He implored her to remember his own situation and throw over her supper, throw over everything. He would wait for her with unspeakable impatience in Balaklava Place.

He did so when he got there, but it took half an hour. Interminable seemed his lonely vigil in Miss Lumley's drawing-room, where the character of the original proprietress came out to him more than before in a kind of after-glow of old sociabilities, a vulgar ghostly vibration. The numerous candles had been lighted for him, and Mrs. Rooth's familiar fictions were lying about; but his nerves forbade him the solace of taking a chair and a book. He walked up and down, thinking and listening, and as the long window, the balmy air permitting, stood open into the garden he passed several times in and out. A carriage appeared to stop at the gate—then there was nothing; he heard the rare rattle of wheels and the far-off hum of London. His impatience was

unreasonable, and though he knew this it persisted; it would have been no easy matter for Miriam to break away from the flock of her felicitators. Still less simple was it doubtless for her to leave poor Dashwood with his supper on his hands. Perhaps she would bring Dashwood with her to time her; she was capable of playing him—that is playing Sherringham—or even playing them both, that trick. Perhaps the little wretch in buttons (Peter remembered now the omitted shilling) had only pretended to go round with his card, had come back with an invented answer. But how could he know, since presumably he couldn't read Italian, that his answer would fit the message? Peter was sorry now that he himself had not gone round, not snatched Miriam bodily away, made sure of her and of what he wanted of her.

When half an hour had elapsed he regarded it as proved that she wouldn't come, and, asking himself what he should do, determined to drive off again and seize her at Basil Dashwood's feast. Then he remembered Nick had mentioned that this entertainment was not to be held at the young actor's lodgings, but at some tavern or restaurant, the name of which he had not heeded. Suddenly however Sherringham became aware with joy that this name didn't matter, for there was something at the garden-door at last. He rushed out before Miriam had had time to ring, and saw as she stepped out of the carriage that she was alone. Now that she was there, that he had this evidence she had listened to him and trusted him, all his impatience and exasperation melted away and a flood of pleading tenderness came out in the first words he spoke to her. It was far "dearer" of her than he had any

right to dream, but she was the best and kindest creature—this showed it—as well as the most wonderful. He was really not off his head with his contradictory ways; no, before heaven, he wasn't, and he would explain, he would make everything clear. Everything was changed.

Miriam stopped short, in the little dusky garden, looking at him in the light of the open window. Then she called back to the coachman—they had left the garden-door open: "Wait for me, mind; I shall want you again."

"What's the matter—won't you stay?" Peter asked. "Are you going out again at this absurd hour? I won't hurt you," he urged gently. And he went back and closed the garden-door. He wanted to say to the coachman: "It's no matter; please drive away." At the same time he wouldn't for the world have done anything offensive to Miriam.

"I've come because I thought it better to-night, as things have turned out, to do the thing you ask me, whatever it may be. That's probably what you calculated I would think, eh? What this evening has been you've seen, and I must allow that your hand's in it. That you know for yourself—that you doubtless felt as you sat there. But I confess I don't imagine what you want of me here, now," Miriam added. She had remained standing in the path.

Peter felt the irony of her "now," and how it made a fool of him, but he had been prepared for it and for much worse. He had begged her not to think him a fool, but in truth at present he cared little if she did. Very likely he was, in spite of his plea that everything was changed—he cared little even himself. However, he spoke in the tone of intense

reason and of the fullest disposition to satisfy her. This lucidity only took still more from the dignity of his tergiversation: his separation from her the day before had had such pretensions to being lucid. But the explanation, the justification, were in the very fact, and the fact had complete possession of him. He named it when he replied to Miriam: "I've simply overrated my strength."

"Oh, I knew—I knew! That's why I entreated you not to come!" she groaned. She turned away impatiently, and for a moment he thought she would retreat to her carriage. But he passed his hand into her arm, to draw her forward, and after an instant he felt her yield.

"The fact is we must have this thing out," he said. Then he added, as he made her go into the house, bending over her: "The failure of my strength—that was just the reason of my coming."

She burst out laughing at these words, as she entered the drawing-room, and her laugh made them sound pompous in their false wisdom. She flung off, as a good-natured tribute to the image of their having the thing out, a white shawl that had been wrapped round her. She was still painted and bedizened, in the splendid dress of her fifth act, so that she seemed protected and alienated by the character she had been representing. "Whatever it is you want (when I understand), you'll be very brief, won't you? Do you know I've given up a charming supper for you? Mamma has gone there. I've promised to go back to them."

"You're an angel not to have let her come with you. I'm sure she wanted to," said Sherringham.

"Oh, she's all right, but she's nervous," Miriam rejoined. Then she added quickly: "Couldn't she keep you away after all?"

"Whom are you talking about?" Biddy Dormer was as absent from Sherringham's mind as if she had never existed.

"The charming girl you were with this morning. Is she so afraid of obliging me? Oh, she'd be so good for you!"

"Don't speak of that," said Peter, gravely. "I was in perfect good faith yesterday when I took leave of you. I was —I was. But I can't—I can't: you are too unutterably dear to me."

"Oh, don't—please don't," moaned Miriam. She stood before the fireless chimney-piece with one of her hands upon it. "If it's only to say that, don't you know, what's the use?"

"It isn't only to say that. I've a plan, a perfect plan: the whole thing lies clear before me."

"And what is the whole thing?"

He hesitated a moment. "You say your mother's nervous. Ah, if you knew how nervous I am!"

"Well, I'm not. Go on."

"Give it up—give it up!" stammered Sherringham.

"Give it up?" Miriam fixed him like a mild Medusa.

"I'll marry you to-morrow if you'll renounce; and in return for the sacrifice you make for me I'll do more for you than ever was done for a woman before."

"Renounce, after to-night? Do you call that a plan?" asked Miriam. "Those are old words and very foolish ones: you wanted something of the sort a year ago."

"Oh, I fluttered round the idea then; we were talking in

the air. I didn't really believe I could make you see it then, and certainly you didn't see it. My own future moreover wasn't definite to me. I didn't know what I could offer you. But these last months have made a difference, and I do know now. Now what I say is deliberate, it's deeply meditated. I simply can't live without you, and I hold that together we may do great things."

"What sort of things?" Miriam inquired.

"The things of my profession—of my life—the things one does for one's country, the responsibility and the honour of great affairs; deeply fascinating when one's immersed in them, and more exciting than the excitements of the theatre. Care for me only a little and you'll see what they are, they'll take hold of you. Believe me, believe me," Sherringham pleaded, "every fibre of my being trembles in what I say to you."

"You admitted yesterday it wouldn't do," said Miriam. "Where were the fibres of your being then?"

"They trembled even more than now, and I was trying, like an ass, not to feel them. Where was this evening, yesterday —where were the maddening hours I've just spent? Ah, you're the perfection of perfections, and as I sat there to-night you taught me what I really want."

"The perfection of perfections?" the girl repeated interrogatively, with the strangest smile.

"I needn't try to tell you: you must have felt to-night, with such rapture, what you are, what you can do. How can I give that up?" Sherringham asked.

"How can *I*, my poor friend? I like your plans and your

responsibilities and your great affairs, as you call them. *Voyons*, they're infantile. I've just shown that I'm a perfection of perfections: therefore it's just the moment to renounce, as you gracefully say? Oh, I was sure, I was sure!" And Miriam paused, resting solicitous, pitying eyes upon her visitor, as if she were trying to think of some arrangement that would help him out of his absurdity. "I was sure, I mean, that if you did come your poor dear doating brain would be quite addled," she presently went on. "I can't be a muff in public just for you, *pourtant*. Dear me, why do you like us so much?"

"Like you? I loathe you!"

"*Je le vois parbleu bien!* I mean, why do you feel us, judge us, understand us so well? I please you because you see, because you know; and because I please you, you must adapt me to your convenience, you must take me over, as they say. You admire me as an artist and therefore you wish to put me into a box in which the artist will breathe her last. Ah, be reasonable; you must let her live!"

"Let her live? As if I could prevent her living!" Peter cried, with unmistakable conviction. "Even if I wanted, how could I prevent a spirit like yours from expressing itself? Don't talk about my putting you in a box, for, dearest child, I'm taking you out of one. The artist is irrepressible, eternal; she'll be in everything you are and in everything you do, and you'll go about with her triumphantly, exerting your powers, charming the world, carrying everything before you."

Miriam's colour rose, through her paint, at this vivid picture, and she asked whimsically: "Shall you like that?"

"Like my wife to be the most brilliant woman in Europe? I think I can do with it."

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

"Not a bit."

"Bravely said. How little you know me after all!" sighed the girl.

"I tell the truth," Peter went on; "and you must do me the justice to admit that I have taken the time to dig deep into my feelings. I'm not an infatuated boy; I've lived, I've had experience, I've observed; in short I know what I'm about. It isn't a thing to reason about; it's simply a need that consumes me. I've put it on starvation diet, but it's no use—really it's no use, Miriam," poor Sherringham pursued, with a soft quaver that betrayed all his sincerity. "It isn't a question of my trusting you; it's simply a question of your trusting me. You're all right, as I've heard you say yourself; you're frank, spontaneous, generous; you're a magnificent creature. Just quietly marry me, and I'll manage you."

"Manage me?" The girl's inflection was droll; it made Sherringham change colour.

"I mean I'll give you a larger life than the largest you can get in any other way. The stage is great, no doubt, but the world is greater. It's a bigger theatre than any of those places in the Strand. We'll go in for realities instead of fables, and you'll do them far better than you do the fables."

Miriam had listened to him attentively, but her face showed her despair at his perverted ingenuity. "Excuse me for saying so, after your delightful tributes to my worth," she

returned in a moment, "but I've never listened to such a flood of determined sophistry. You think so well of me that humility itself ought to keep me silent; nevertheless I *must* utter a few shabby words of sense. I'm a magnificent creature on the stage—well and good; it's what I want to be and it's charming to see such evidence that I succeed. But off the stage—come, come: I should lose all my advantages. The fact is so patent that it seems to me I'm very good-natured even to discuss it with you."

"Are you on the stage now, pray? Ah, Miriam, if it were not for the respect I owe you!" her companion murmured.

"If it were not for that I shouldn't have come here to meet you. My talent is the thing that takes you: could there be a better proof than that it's to-night's exhibition of it that has settled you? It's indeed a misfortune that you're so sensitive to this particular kind of talent, since it plays such tricks with your power to see things as they are. Without it I should be a dull, ignorant, third-rate woman, and yet that's the fate you ask me to face and insanely pretend you are ready to face yourself."

"Without it—without it?" Sherringham cried. "Your own sophistry is infinitely worse than mine. I should like to see you without it for the fiftieth part of a second. What I ask you to give up is the dusty boards of the playhouse and the flaring footlights, but not the very essence of your being. Your talent is yourself, and it's because it's yourself that I yearn for you. If it had been a thing you could leave behind by the easy dodge of stepping off the stage I would never have looked at you a second time. Don't talk to me as if I were

a simpleton, with your false simplifications! You were made to charm and console, to represent beauty and harmony and variety to miserable human beings; and the daily life of man is the theatre for that—not a vulgar shop with a turnstile, that's open only once in the twenty-four hours. Without it, verily?" Sherringham went on, with rising scorn and exasperated passion. "Please let me know the first time you're without your face, without your voice, your step, your exquisite spirit, the turn of your head and the wonder of your eye!"

Miriam, at this, moved away from him with a port that resembled what she sometimes showed on the stage when she turned her young back upon the footlights and then, after a few steps, grandly swept round again. This evolution she performed (it was over in an instant) on the present occasion; even to stopping short with her eyes upon him and her head erect. "Surely it's strange," she said, "the way the other solution never occurs to you."

"The other solution?"

"That *you* should stay on the stage."

"I don't understand you," Sherringham confessed.

"Stay on *my* stage; come off your own."

Sherringham hesitated a moment. "You mean that if I'll do that you'll have me?"

"I mean that if it were to occur to you to offer me a little sacrifice on your own side, it might place the matter in a slightly more attractive light."

"Continue to let you act—as my wife?" Sherringham demanded. "Is it a real condition? Am I to understand that those are your terms?"

"I may say so without fear, because you'll never accept them."

"Would *you* accept them, from me—accept the sacrifice, see me throw up my work, my prospects (of course I should have to do that), and simply become your appendage?"

"My dear fellow, you invite me with the best conscience in the world to become yours."

"The cases are not equal. You would make of me the husband of an actress. I should make of you the wife of an ambassador."

"The husband of an actress, *c'est bientôt dit*, in that tone of scorn! If you're consistent," said Miriam, "it ought to be a proud position for you."

"What do you mean, if I'm consistent?"

"Haven't you always insisted on the beauty and interest of our art and the greatness of our mission? Haven't you almost come to blows with poor Gabriel Nash about it? What did all that mean if you won't face the first consequences of your theory? Either it was an enlightened conviction or it was an empty pretence. If it was heartless humbug I'm glad to know it," Miriam rolled out, with a darkening eye. "The better the cause, it seems to me, the better the deed; and if the theatre *is* important to the 'human spirit,' as you used to say so charmingly, and if into the bargain you have the pull of being so fond of me, I don't see why it should be monstrous to give us your services in an intelligent indirect way. Of course if you're not serious we needn't talk at all; but if you are, with your conception of what the actor can do, why is it so base to come to the actor's aid, taking one

devotion with another? If I'm so fine I'm worth looking after a bit, and the place where I'm finest is the place to look after me!"

"You were never finer than at this minute, in the deepest domesticity of private life," Sherringham returned. "I have no conception whatever of what the actor can do, and no theory whatever about the importance of the theatre. Any infatuation of that sort has completely quitted me, and for all I care the theatre may go to the dogs."

"You're dishonest, you're ungrateful, you're false!" Miriam flashed. "It was the theatre that brought you here; if it hadn't been for the theatre I never would have looked at you. It was in the name of the theatre you first made love to me; it is to the theatre that you owe every advantage that, so far as I'm concerned, you possess."

"I seem to possess a great many!" groaned Sherringham.

"You might certainly make more of those you have! You make me angry, but I want to be fair," said the glowing girl, "and I can't be unless you will. You are not fair, nor candid, nor honourable, when you swallow your words and abjure your faith, when you throw over old friends and old memories for a selfish purpose."

"'Selfish purpose' is in your own convenient idiom, *bientôt dit*," Sherringham answered. "I suppose you consider that if I truly esteemed you I should be ashamed to deprive the world of the light of your genius. Perhaps my esteem isn't of the right quality: there are different kinds, aren't there? At any rate I've explained that I propose to deprive the world of nothing at all. You shall be celebrated, *allez!*"

"Rubbish—rubbish!" Miriam mocked, turning away again. "I know of course," she added quickly, "that to befool yourself with such platitudes you must be pretty bad."

"Yes, I'm pretty bad," Sherringham admitted, looking at her dismally. "What do you do with the declaration you made me the other day—the day I found my cousin here—that you'd take me if I should come to you as one who had risen high?"

Miriam reflected a moment. "I remember—the chaff about the orders, the stars and garters. My poor dear friend, don't be so painfully literal. Don't you know a joke when you see it? It was to worry your cousin, wasn't it? But it didn't in the least succeed."

"Why should you wish to worry my cousin?"

"Because he's so provoking. And surely I had my freedom no less than I have it now. Pray, what explanations should I have owed you and in what fear of you should I have gone? However, that has nothing to do with it. Say I did tell you that we might arrange it on the day that you should come to me covered with glory in the shape of little tinkling medals: why should you anticipate that transaction by so many years and knock me down such a long time in advance? Where is the glory, please, and where are the medals?"

"Dearest girl, am I not going to America (a capital promotion) next month," Sherringham argued, "and can't you trust me enough to believe that I speak with a real appreciation of the facts—that I'm not lying to you, in short—when I tell you that I've my foot in the stirrup? The glory's dawning. *I'm* all right too."

"What you propose to me then is to accompany you *tout bonnement* to your new post."

"You put it in a nutshell," smiled Sherringham.

"You're touching; it has its charm. But you can't get anything in America, you know. I'm assured there are no medals to be picked up there. That's why the diplomatic body hate it."

"It's on the way—it's on the way," Sherringham hammered, feverishly. "They don't keep us long in disagreeable places unless we want to stay. There's one thing you can get anywhere if you're clever, and nowhere if you're not, and in the disagreeable places generally more than in the others: and that (since it's the element of the question we're discussing) is simply success. It's odious to be put on one's swagger, but I protest against being treated as if I had nothing to offer—to offer to a person who has such glories of her own. I'm not a little presumptuous ass; I'm a man accomplished and determined, and the omens are on my side." Peter faltered a moment, and then with a queer expression he went on: "Remember, after all, that, strictly speaking, your glories are also still in the future." An exclamation, at these words, burst from Miriam's lips, but her companion resumed quickly: "Ask my official superiors, ask any of my colleagues if they consider that I've nothing to offer."

Peter Sherringham had an idea, as he ceased speaking, that Miriam was on the point of breaking out with some strong word of resentment at his allusion to the contingent nature of her prospects. But it only twisted the weapon in his wound to hear her saying with extraordinary mildness: "It's

perfectly true that my glories are still to come, that I may fizzle out and that my little success of to-day is perhaps a mere flash in the pan. Stranger things have been—something of that sort happens every day. But don't we talk too much of that part of it?" she asked, with a weary tolerance that was noble in its effect. "Surely it's vulgar to consider only the noise one's going to make; especially when one remembers how unintelligent nine-tenths of it will be. It isn't to my glories that I cling; it's simply to my idea, even if it's destined to sink me into obscurity. I like it better than anything else—a thousand times better (I'm sorry to have to put it in such a way) than tossing up my head as the fine lady of a little coterie."

"A little coterie? I don't know what you're talking about!" Peter retorted, with considerable heat.

"A big coterie, then! It's only that, at the best. A nasty, prim 'official' woman, who is perched on her little local pedestal and thinks she's a queen for ever because she's ridiculous for an hour! Oh, you needn't tell me. I've seen them abroad, I could imitate them here. I could do one for you on the spot if I were not so tired. It's scarcely worth mentioning perhaps, but I'm ready to drop." Miriam picked up the white mantle she had tossed off, flinging it round her with her usual amplitude of gesture. "They're waiting for me, and I confess I'm hungry. If I don't hurry they'll eat up all the nice things. Don't say I haven't been obliging, and come back when you're better. Good-night."

"I quite agree with you that we've talked too much about the vulgar side of our question," Peter responded, walking

round to get between her and the French window, by which she apparently had a view of leaving the room. "That's because I've wanted to bribe you. Bribery is almost always vulgar."

"Yes, you should do better. *Merci!* There's a cab; some of them have come for me. I must go," Miriam added, listening for a sound that reached her from the road.

Sherringham listened too, making out no cab. "Believe me, it isn't wise to turn your back on such an affection as mine and on such a confidence," he went on, speaking almost in a warning tone (there was a touch of superior sternness in it, as of a rebuke for real folly, but it was meant to be tender), and stopping her within a few feet of the window. "Such things are the most precious that life has to give us," he added, all but didactically.

Miriam had listened again for a moment; then she appeared to give up the idea of the cab. The reader need hardly be told, at this stage of her youthful history, that the right way for her lover to soothe her was not to represent himself as acting for her highest good. "I like your calling it confidence," she presently said; and the deep note of the few words had something of the distant mutter of thunder.

"What is it, then, when I offer you everything I am, everything I have, everything I shall achieve?"

She seemed to measure him for a moment, as if she were thinking whether she should try to pass him. But she remained where she was and she returned: "I'm sorry for you, yes, but I'm also rather ashamed of you."

"Ashamed of me?"

"A brave offer to see me through—that's what I should call confidence. You say to-day that you hate the theatre; and do you know what has made you do it? The fact that it has too large a place in your mind to let you repudiate it and throw it over with a good conscience. It has a deep fascination for you, and yet you're not strong enough to make the concession of taking up with it publicly, in my person. You're ashamed of yourself for that, as all your constant high claims for it are on record; so you blaspheme against it, to try and cover your retreat and your treachery and straighten out your personal situation. But it won't do, my dear fellow—it won't do at all," Miriam proceeded, with a triumphant, almost judicial lucidity which made her companion stare; "you haven't the smallest excuse of stupidity, and your perversity is no excuse at all. Leave her alone altogether—a poor girl who's making her way—or else come frankly to help her, to give her the benefit of your wisdom. Don't lock her up for life under the pretence of doing her good. What does one most good is to see a little honesty. You're the best judge, the best critic, the best observer, the best *believer*, that I've ever come across; you're committed to it by everything you've said to me for a twelvemonth, by the whole turn of your mind, by the way you've followed up this business of ours. If an art is noble and beneficent, one shouldn't be afraid to offer it one's arm. Your cousin isn't: he can make sacrifices."

"My cousin?" shouted Peter. "Why, wasn't it only the other day that you were throwing his sacrifices in his teeth?"

Under this imputation upon her consistency Miriam flinched but for an instant. "I did that to worry *you*," she smiled.

"Why should you wish to worry me if you care so little about me?"

"Care little about you? Haven't I told you often, didn't I tell you yesterday, how much I care? Ain't I showing it now by spending half the night here with you (giving myself away to all those cynics), taking all this trouble to persuade you to hold up your head and have the courage of your opinions?"

"You invent my opinions for your convenience," said Peter. "As long ago as the night I introduced you, in Paris, to Mademoiselle Voisin, you accused me of looking down on those who practise your art. I remember you almost scratched my eyes out because I didn't kootoo enough to your friend Dashwood. Perhaps I didn't; but if already at that time I was so wide of the mark you can scarcely accuse me of treachery now."

"I don't remember, but I dare say you're right," Miriam meditated. "What I accused you of then was probably simply what I reproach you with now: the germ at least of your deplorable weakness. You consider that we do awfully valuable work, and yet you wouldn't for the world let people suppose that you really take our side. If your position was even at that time so false, so much the worse for you, that's all. Oh, it's refreshing," the girl exclaimed, after a pause during which Sherringham seemed to himself to taste the full bitterness of despair, so baffled and derided he felt—"oh, it's refreshing to see a man burn his ships in a cause that appeals

to him, give up something for it and break with hideous timidities and snobberies! It's the most beautiful sight in the world."

Sherringham, sore as he was and angry and exasperated, nevertheless burst out laughing at this. "You're magnificent, you give me at this moment the finest possible illustration of what you mean by burning one's ships. Verily, verily, there's no one like you: talk of timidity, talk of refreshment! If I had any talent for it I'd go on the stage to-morrow, to spend my life with you the better."

"If you'll do that I'll be your wife the day after your first appearance. That would be really respectable," said Miriam.

"Unfortunately I've no talent."

"That would only make it the more respectable."

"You're just like Nick," Peter rejoined: "you've taken to imitating Gabriel Nash. Don't you see that it's only if it were a question of my going on the stage myself that there would be a certain fitness in your contrasting me invidiously with Nick Dormer and in my giving up one career for another? But simply to stand in the wing and hold your shawl and your smelling-bottle!" Peter concluded mournfully, as if he had ceased to debate.

"Holding my shawl and my smelling-bottle is a mere detail, representing a very small part of the various precious services, the protection and encouragement for which a woman in my position might be indebted to a man interested in her work and accomplished and determined, as you very justly describe yourself."

"And would it be your idea that such a man should live on

the money earned by an exhibition of the person of his still more accomplished and still more determined wife?"

"Why not, if they work together—if there's something of his spirit and his support in everything she does?" Miriam demanded. "*Je vous attendais*, with the famous 'person;' of course that's the great stick they beat us with. Yes, we show it for money, those of us who have anything to show, and some no doubt who haven't, which is the real scandal. What will you have? It's only the envelope of the idea, it's only our machinery, which ought to be conceded to us; and in proportion as the idea takes hold of us do we become unconscious of the clumsy body. Poor old 'person' —if you knew what *we* think of it! If you don't forget it, that's your own affair: it shows that you're dense before the idea."

"That I'm dense?"

"I mean the public is—the public who pays us. After all, they expect us to look at them too, who are not half so well worth it. If you should see some of the creatures who have the face to plant themselves there in the stalls, before one, for three mortal hours! I dare say it would be simpler to have no bodies, but we're all in the same box, and it would be a great injustice to the idea, and we're all showing ourselves all the while; only some of us are not worth paying."

"You're extraordinarily droll, but somehow I can't laugh at you," said Peter, his handsome face lengthened to a point that sufficiently attested the fact. "Do you remember the second time I ever saw you—the day you recited at my place?" he abruptly inquired, a good deal as if he were

drawing from his quiver an arrow which, if it was the last, was also one of the most pointed.

"Perfectly, and what an idiot I was, though it was only yesterday!"

"You expressed to me then a deep detestation of the sort of self-exposure to which the profession you were seeking to enter would commit you. If you compared yourself to a contortionist at a country fair I'm only taking my cue from you."

"I don't know what I may have said then," replied Miriam, whose steady flight was not arrested by this ineffectual bolt; "I was, no doubt, already wonderful for talking of things I know nothing about. I was only on the brink of the stream and I perhaps thought the water colder than it is. One warms it a bit one's self, when once one is in. Of course I'm a contortionist and of course there's a hateful side; but don't you see how that very fact puts a price on every compensation, on the help of those who are ready to insist on the *other* side, the grand one, and especially on the sympathy of the person who is ready to insist most and to keep before us the great thing, the element that makes up for everything?"

"The element?" Peter questioned, with a vagueness which was pardonably exaggerated. "Do you mean your success?"

"I mean what you've so often been eloquent about," the girl returned, with an indulgent shrug—"the way we simply stir people's souls. Ah, there's where life can help us," she broke out, with a change of tone, "there's where human relations and affections can help us; love and faith and joy and suffering and experience—I don't know what to call 'em!

They suggest things, they light them up and sanctify them, as you may say; they make them appear worth doing." She became radiant for a moment, as if with a splendid vision; then melting into still another accent, which seemed all nature and harmony, she proceeded: "I must tell you that in the matter of what we can do for each other I have a tremendously high ideal. I go in for closeness of union, for identity of interest. A true marriage, as they call it, must do one a lot of good!"

Sherringham stood there looking at her a minute, during which her eyes sustained the rummage of his gaze without a relenting gleam of the sense of cruelty or of paradox. With a passionate but inarticulate ejaculation he turned away from her and remained, on the edge of the window, his hands in his pockets, gazing defeatedly, doggedly, into the featureless night, into the little black garden which had nothing to give him but a familiar smell of damp. The warm darkness had no relief for him, and Miriam's histrionic hardness flung him back against a fifth-rate world, against a bedimmed, star-punctured nature which had no consolation—the bleared, irresponsive eyes of the London heaven. For the brief space that he glared at these things he dumbly and helplessly raged. What he wanted was something that was not in *that* thick prospect. What was the meaning of this sudden offensive importunity of "art," this senseless mocking catch, like some irritating chorus of conspirators in a bad opera, in which Miriam's voice was so incongruously conjoined with Nick's and in which Biddy's sweet little pipe had not scrupled still more bewilderingly to mingle? Art be damned: what commission,

after all, had he ever given it to better him or bother him? If the pointless groan in which Peter exhaled a part of his humiliation had been translated into words, these words would have been as heavily charged with the genuine British mistrust of the bothersome principle as if the poor fellow speaking them had never quitted his island. Several acquired perceptions had struck a deep root in him, but there was an immemorial compact formation which lay deeper still. He tried at the present hour to rest upon it spiritually, but found it inelastic; and at the very moment when he was most conscious of this absence of the rebound or of any tolerable ease his vision was solicited by an object which, as he immediately guessed, could only add to the complication of things.

An undefined shape hovered before him in the garden, halfway between the gate and the house; it remained outside of the broad shaft of lamplight projected from the window. It wavered for a moment after it had become aware of Peter's observation, and then whisked round the corner of the little villa. This characteristic movement so effectually dispelled the mystery (it could only be Mrs. Rooth who resorted to such conspicuous secrecies) that, to feel that the game was up and his interview over, Sherringham had no need of seeing the figure reappear on second thoughts and dodge about in the dusk with a vexatious sportive imbecility. Evidently Miriam's warning of a few minutes before had been founded: a cab had deposited her anxious mother at the garden-door. Mrs. Rooth had entered with precautions; she had approached the house and retreated; she had effaced herself—had peered and waited and listened. Maternal solicitude and muddled calculations

had drawn her away from a festival as yet only imperfectly commemorative. The heroine of the occasion of course had been intolerably missed, so that the old woman had both obliged the company and quieted her own nerves by jumping insistently into a hansom and rattling up to St. John's Wood to reclaim the absentee. But if she had wished to be in time she had also desired not to be abrupt; she would have been still more embarrassed to say what she aspired to promote than to phrase what she had proposed to hinder. She wanted to abstain tastefully, to interfere felicitously, and, more generally and justifiably (the small hours had come), to see what her young charges were doing. She would probably have gathered that they were quarrelling, and she appeared now to be telegraphing to Sherringham to know if it were over. He took no notice of her signals, if signals they were; he only felt that before he made way for the odious old woman there was one faint little spark he might strike from Miriam's flint.

Without letting her guess that her mother was on the premises he turned again to his companion, half expecting that she would have taken her chance to regard their discussion as more than terminated and by the other egress flit away from him in silence. But she was still there; she was in the act of approaching him with a manifest intention of kindness, and she looked indeed, to his surprise, like an angel of mercy.

"Don't let us part so disagreeably," she said, "with your trying to make me feel as if I were merely disobliging. It's no use talking—we only hurt each other. Let us hold our tongues like decent people and go about our business. It isn't as if you hadn't any cure—when you have such a capital

one. Try it, try it, my dear friend—you'll see! I wish you the highest promotion and the quickest—every success and every reward. When you've got them all, some day, and I've become a great swell too, we'll meet on that solid basis and you'll be glad I've been nasty now."

"Surely before I leave you I've a right to ask you this," Sherringham answered, holding fast in both his own the cool hand of farewell that she had finally tormented him with. "Are you ready to follow up by a definite promise your implied assurance that I have a remedy?"

"A definite promise?" Miriam benignly gazed, with the perfection of evasion. "I don't 'imply' that you have a remedy. I declare it on the housetops. That delightful girl—"

"I'm not talking of any delightful girl but you!" Peter broke in with a voice which, as he afterwards learned, struck Mrs. Rooth's ears, in the garden, with affright. "I simply hold you, under pain of being convicted of the grossest prevarication, to the strict sense of what you said a quarter of an hour ago."

"Ah, I've said so many things; one has to do that to get rid of you. You rather hurt my hand," she added, jerking it away in a manner that showed that if she was an angel of mercy her mercy was partly for herself.

"As I understand you, then, I may have some hope if I do renounce my profession?" Peter pursued. "If I break with everything, my prospects, my studies, my training, my emoluments, my past and my future, the service of my country and the ambition of my life, and engage to take up instead the business of watching your interests so far as I may learn how and ministering to your triumphs so far as may in me lie—if

after further reflection I decide to go through these preliminaries, have I your word that I may definitely look to you to reward me with your precious hand?"

"I don't think you have any right to put the question to me now," said Miriam, with a promptitude partly produced perhaps by the clear-cut form Peter's solemn speech had given (it was a charm to hear it) to each item of his enumeration. "The case is so very contingent, so dependent on what you ingeniously call your further reflection. While you reserve yourself you ask me to commit myself. If it's a question of further reflection, why did you drag me up here? And then," she added, "I'm so far from wishing you to take any such monstrous step."

"Monstrous, you call it? Just now you said it would be sublime."

"Sublime if it's done with spontaneity, with passion; ridiculous if it's done after further reflection. As you said perfectly a while ago, it isn't a thing to reason about."

"Ah, what a help you'd be to me in diplomacy!" Sherringham cried. "Will you give me a year to consider?"

"Would you trust me for a year?"

"Why not, if I'm ready to trust you for life?"

"Oh, I shouldn't be free then, worse luck. And how much you seem to take for granted one must like you!"

"Remember that you've made a great point of your liking me. Wouldn't you do so still more if I were heroic?"

Miriam looked at him a moment. "I think I should pity you, in such a cause. Give it all to *her;* don't throw away a real happiness!"

"Ah, you can't back out of your position with a few vague and even rather impertinent words!" Sherringham declared. "You accuse me of swallowing my protestations, but you swallow yours. You've painted in heavenly colours the sacrifice I'm talking of, and now you must take the consequences."

"The consequences."

"Why, my coming back in a year to square you."

"Ah, you're tiresome!" cried Miriam. "Come back when you like. I don't wonder you've grown desperate, but fancy *me* then!" she added, looking past him at a new interlocutor.

"Yes, but if he'll square you!" Peter heard Mrs. Rooth's voice respond conciliatingly behind him. She had stolen up to the window now, she had passed the threshold, she was in the room, but her daughter had not been startled. "What is it he wants to do, dear?" she continued, to Miriam.

"To induce me to marry him if he'll go upon the stage. He'll practise over there, where he's going, and then he'll come back and appear. Isn't it too dreadful? Talk him out of it, stay with him, soothe him!" the girl hurried on. "You'll find some *bibite* and some biscuits in the cupboard—keep him with you, pacify him, give him *his* little supper. Meanwhile I'll go to mine; I'll take the brougham; don't follow!"

With these words Miriam bounded into the garden, and her white drapery shone for an instant in the darkness before she disappeared. Peter looked about him, to pick up his hat, and while he did so he heard the bang of the gate and the quick carriage getting into motion. Mrs. Rooth appeared to sway excitedly for a moment in opposed directions: that of the impulse to rush after Miriam and that of the extraordinary

possibility to which the young lady had alluded. She seemed in doubt, but at a venture, detaining him with a maternal touch, she twinkled up at their visitor like an insinuating glow-worm.

"I'm so glad you came."

"I'm not. I've got nothing by it," he said, finding his hat.

"Oh, it was so beautiful!" she coaxed.

"The play—yes, wonderful. I'm afraid it's too late for me to avail myself of the privilege your daughter offers me. Good-night."

"Oh, it's a pity; won't you take *anything?*" asked Mrs. Rooth. "When I heard your voice so high I was scared and I hung back." But before he could reply she added: "Are you really thinking of the stage?"

"It comes to the same thing."

"Do you mean you've proposed?"

"Oh, unmistakably."

"And what does she say?"

"Why, you heard: she says I'm an ass."

"Ah, the little rascal!" laughed Mrs. Rooth. "Leave her to me. I'll help you. But you *are* mad. Give up nothing—least of all your advantages."

"I won't give up your daughter," said Peter, reflecting that if this was cheap it was at any rate good enough for Mrs. Rooth. He mended it a little indeed by adding darkly: "But you can't make her take me."

"I can prevent her taking any one else."

"Oh, can you!" Peter ejaculated, with more scepticism than ceremony.

"You'll see—you'll see." He passed into the garden, but, after she had blown out the candles and drawn the window to, Mrs. Rooth went with him. "All you've got to do is to be yourself—to be true to your fine position," she explained as they proceeded. "Trust me with the rest—trust me and be quiet."

"How can one be quiet after this magnificent evening?"

"Yes, but it's just that!" panted the eager old woman. "It has launched her so, on this sea of dangers, that to make up for the loss of the old security (don't you know?) we must take a still firmer hold."

"Ay, of what?" asked Sherringham, as Mrs. Rooth's comfort became vague while she stopped with him at the garden-door.

"Ah, you know: of the *real* life, of the true anchor!" Her hansom was waiting for her, and she added: "I kept it, you see; but a little extravagance, on the night one's fortune has come!"

Peter stared. Yes, there were people whose fortune had come; but he managed to stammer: "Are you following her again?"

"For you—for you!" And Mrs. Rooth clambered into the vehicle. From the seat, enticingly, she offered him the place beside her. "Won't you come too? I know he asked you." Peter declined with a quick gesture, and as he turned away he heard her call after him, to cheer him on his lonely walk: "I shall keep this up; I shall never lose sight of her!"

XV.

When Mrs. Dallow returned to London, just before London broke up, the fact was immediately known in Calcutta Gardens and was promptly communicated to Nick Dormer by his sister Bridget. He had learnt it in no other way—he had had no correspondence with Julia during her absence. He gathered that his mother and sisters were not ignorant of her whereabouts (he never mentioned her name to them); but as to this he was not sure whether the source of their information was the *Morning Post* or a casual letter received by the inscrutable Biddy. He knew that Biddy had some epistolary commerce with Julia, and he had an impression that Grace occasionally exchanged letters with Mrs. Gresham. Biddy, however, who, as he was well aware, was always studying what he would like, forbore to talk to him about the absent mistress of Harsh, beyond once dropping the remark that she had gone from Florence to Venice and was enjoying gondolas and sunsets too much to leave them. Nick's comment on this was that she was a happy woman to have such a go at Titian and Tintoret: as he spoke and for some time afterwards the sense of how he himself should enjoy a similar "go" made him ache with ineffectual longing.

He had forbidden himself for the present to think of

absence, not only because it would be inconvenient and expensive, but because it would be a kind of retreat from the enemy, a concession to difficulty. The enemy was no particular person and no particular body of persons: not his mother; not Mr. Carteret, who, as Nick heard from the doctor at Beauclere, lingered on, sinking and sinking till his vitality appeared to have the vertical depth of a gold-mine; not his pacified constituents, who had found a healthy diversion in returning another Liberal, wholly without Mrs. Dallow's aid (she had not participated even to the extent of a responsive telegram in the election); not his late colleagues in the House, nor the biting satirists of the newspapers, nor the brilliant women he took down at dinner-parties (there was only one sense in which he ever took them down), nor his friends, nor his foes, nor his private thoughts, nor the periodical phantom of his shocked father: it was simply the general awkwardness of his situation. This awkwardness was connected with the sense of responsibility that Gabriel Nash so greatly deprecated—ceasing to roam, of late, on purpose to miss as few scenes as possible of the drama, rapidly growing dull, alas, of his friend's destiny; but that compromising relation scarcely drew the soreness from it. The public flurry produced by Nick's collapse had only been large enough to mark the flatness of his position when it was over. To have had a few jokes cracked audibly at one's expense was not an ordeal worth talking of; the hardest thing about it was merely that there had not been enough of them to yield a proportion of good ones. Nick had felt, in short, the benefit of living in an age and in a society where number and pressure have, for

the individual figure, especially when it's a zero, compensations almost equal to their cruelties.

No, the pinch, for our young man's conscience, after a few weeks had passed, was simply an acute mistrust of the superficiality of performance into which the desire to justify himself might hurry him. That desire was passionate as regards Julia Dallow; it was ardent also as regards his mother; and, to make it absolutely uncomfortable it was complicated with the conviction that neither of them would recognize his justification even when they should see it. They probably couldn't if they would, and very likely they wouldn't if they could. He assured himself however that this limitation wouldn't matter; it was their affair—his own was simply to have the right sort of thing to show. The work he was now attempting was not the right sort of thing; though doubtless Julia for instance would dislike it almost as much as if it were. The two portraits of Miriam, after the first exhilaration of his finding himself at large, filled him with no private glee: they were not in the direction in which for the present he wished really to move. There were moments when he felt almost angry, though of course he held his tongue, when by the few persons who saw them they were pronounced wonderfully clever. That they were wonderfully clever was just the detestable thing in them, so active had that cleverness been in making them seem better than they were. There were people to whom he would have been ashamed to show them, and these were the people whom it would give him most pleasure some day to please. Not only had he many an hour of disgust with his actual work, but he thought he saw, as in an ugly

revelation, that nature had cursed him with an odious facility and that the lesson of his life, the sternest and wholesomest, would be to keep out of the trap it had laid for him. He had fallen into this trap on the threshold and he had only scrambled out with his honour. He had a talent for appearance, and that was the fatal thing; he had a damnable suppleness and a gift of immediate response, a readiness to oblige, that made him seem to take up causes which he really left lying, enabled him to learn enough about them in an hour to have all the air of having made them his own. Many people call them their own who had taken them in much less. He was too clever by half, since this pernicious overflow had been at the bottom of deep disappointments and heart-burnings. He had assumed a virtue and enjoyed assuming it, and the assumption had cheated his father and his mother and his affianced wife and his rich benefactor and the candid burgesses of Harsh and the cynical reporters of the newspapers. His enthusiasms had been but young curiosity, his speeches had been young agility, his professions and adhesions had been like postage-stamps without glue: the head was all right, but they wouldn't stick. He stood ready now to wring the neck of the irrepressible vice which certainly would like nothing better than to get him into further trouble. His only real justification would be to turn patience (his own, of course) inside out; yet if there should be a way to misread that recipe his humbugging genius could be trusted infallibly to discover it. Cheap and easy results would dangle before him, little amateurish conspicuities, helped by his history, at exhibitions; putting it in his power to triumph with a quick "What do

you say to that?" over those he had wounded. The fear of this danger was corrosive; it poisoned even legitimate joys. If he should have a striking picture at the Academy next year it wouldn't be a crime: yet he couldn't help suspecting any conditions that would enable him to be striking so soon. In this way he felt quite enough how Gabriel Nash "had" him whenever he railed at his fever for proof, and how inferior as a productive force the desire to win over the ill-disposed might be to the principle of quiet growth. Nash had a foreign manner of lifting up his finger and waving it before him, as if to put an end to everything, whenever it became, in conversation or discussion, to any extent a question whether any one would like anything.

It was presumably, in some degree at least, a due respect for the principle of quiet growth that kept Nick on the spot at present, made him stick fast to Rosedale Road and Calcutta Gardens and deny himself the simplifications of absence. Do what he would he could not despoil himself of the impression that the disagreeable was somehow connected with the salutary and the "quiet" with the disagreeable, when stubbornly borne; so he resisted a hundred impulses to run away to Paris or to Florence and the temptation to persuade himself by material motion that he was launched. He stayed in London because it seemed to him that he was more conscious of what he had undertaken, and he had a horror of shirking that consciousness. One element in it indeed was the perception that he would have found no great convenience in a foreign journey, even had his judgment approved such a subterfuge. The stoppage of his supplies from Beauclere had now become an

historic fact, with something of the majesty of its class about it: he had had time to see what a difference this would make in his life. His means were small and he had several old debts, the number of which, as he believed, loomed large to his mother's imagination. He could never tell her that she exaggerated, because he told her nothing of that sort now: they had no intimate talk, for an impenetrable partition, a tall bristling hedge of untrimmed misconceptions had sprung up between them. Poor Biddy had made a hole in it, through which she squeezed, from side to side, to keep up communications, at the cost of many rents and scratches; but Lady Agnes walked straight and stiff, never turning her head, never stopping to pluck the least little daisy of consolation. It was in this manner she wished to signify that she had accepted her wrongs. She draped herself in them as in a kind of Roman mantle, and she had never looked so proud and wasted and handsome as now that her eyes rested only upon ruins.

Nick was extremely sorry for her, though he thought there was a dreadful want of grace in her never setting a foot in Rosedale Road (she mentioned his studio no more than if it had been a private gambling-house, or something worse); sorry because he was well aware that for the hour everything must appear to her to have crumbled. The luxury of Broadwood would have to crumble: his mind was very clear about that. Biddy's prospects had withered to the finest, dreariest dust, and Biddy indeed, taking a lesson from her brother's perversities, seemed little disposed to better a bad business. She professed the most peacemaking sentiments, but when it came really to doing something to brighten up the scene she showed

herself portentously corrupted. After Peter Sherringham's heartless flight she had wantonly slighted an excellent opportunity to repair her misfortune. Lady Agnes had reason to know, about the end of June, that young Mr. Grindon, the only son (the other children were girls) of an immensely rich industrial and political baronet in the north, was literally waiting for the faintest sign. This reason she promptly imparted to her younger daughter, whose intelligence had to take it in but who had shown it no other consideration. Biddy had set her charming face as a stone; she would have nothing to do with signs, and she, practically speaking, wilfully, wickedly refused a magnificent offer, so that the young man carried his noble expectations elsewhere. How much in earnest he had been was proved by the fact that before Goodwood had come and gone he was captured by Lady Muriel Macpherson. It was superfluous to insist on the frantic determination to get married revealed by such an accident as that. Nick knew of this episode only through Grace, and he deplored its having occurred in the midst of other disasters.

He knew or he suspected something more as well—something about his brother Percival which, if it should come to light, no season would be genial enough to gloss over. It had usually been supposed that Percy's store of comfort against the ills of life was confined to the infallibility of his rifle. He was not sensitive, but he had always the consolation of killing something. It had suddenly come to Nick's ears however that he had another resource as well, in the person of a robust countrywoman, housed in an ivied corner of Warwickshire, in whom he had long been interested and whom, without any

flourish of magnanimity, he had ended by making his wife. The situation of the latest born of the pledges of this affection, a blooming boy (there had been two or three previously), was therefore perfectly regular and of a nature to make a difference in the worldly position, as the phrase is, of his moneyless uncle. If there be degrees in the absolute and Percy had an heir (others, moreover, would supposably come), Nick would have to regard himself as still more moneyless than before. His brother's last step was doubtless, under the circumstances, to be commended; but such discoveries were enlivening only when they were made in other families, and Lady Agnes would scarcely enjoy learning to what tune she had become a grandmother.

Nick forbore from delicacy to intimate to Biddy that he thought it a pity she couldn't care for Mr. Grindon; but he had a private sense that if she had been capable of such an achievement it would have lightened a little the weight he himself had to carry. He bore her a slight grudge, which lasted until Julia Dallow came back; when the circumstance of the girl's being summoned immediately down to Harsh created a diversion that was perhaps after all only fanciful. Biddy, as we know, entertained a theory, which Nick had found occasion to combat, that Mrs. Dallow had not treated him perfectly well; therefore in going to Harsh the very first time Julia held out a hand to her, so jealous a little sister must have recognized a special inducement. The inducement might have been that Julia had comfort for her, that she was acting by the direct advice of this acute lady, that they were still in close communion on the question of the offers Biddy was not

to accept, that in short Peter Sherringham's sister had taken upon herself to see that Biddy should remain free until the day of the fugitive's inevitable return. Once or twice indeed Nick wondered whether Mrs. Dallow herself was visited, in a larger sense, by the thought of retracing her steps—whether she wished to draw out her young friend's opinion as to how she might do so gracefully. During the few days she was in town Nick had seen her twice, in Great Stanhope Street, but not alone. She had said to him on one of these occasions, in her odd, explosive way: "I should have thought you'd have gone away somewhere—it must be such a bore." Of course she firmly believed he was staying for Miriam, which he really was not; and probably she had written this false impression off to Peter, who still more probably would prefer to regard it as just. Nick was staying for Miriam only in the sense that he should be very glad of the money he might receive for the portrait he was engaged in painting. That money would be a great convenience to him, in spite of the obstructive ground Miriam had taken in pretending (she had blown half a gale about it) that he had had no right to dispose of such a production without her consent. His answer to this was simply that the purchaser was so little of a stranger that it didn't go, as it were, out of the family, out of hers. It didn't matter that Miriam should protest that if Mr. Sherringham had formerly been no stranger he was now utterly one, so that there could be nothing less soothing to him than to see her hated image on his wall. He would back out of the bargain, and Nick would be left with his work on his hands. Nick jeered at this shallow theory and, when she came to sit, the question

served as well as another to sprinkle their familiar silences with chaff. Nick already knew something, as we have seen, of the conditions in which his distracted kinsman had left England; and this connected itself in casual meditation with some of the calculations that he attributed to Julia and Biddy. There had naturally been a sequel to the queer behaviour in which Peter had indulged, at the theatre, on the eve of his departure—a sequel embodied in a remark dropped by Miriam in the course of the first sitting she gave Nick after her great night. "Fancy"—so this observation ran—"fancy the dear man finding time, in the press of all his last duties, to ask me to marry him!"

"He told me you had found time, in the press of all yours, to say you would," Nick replied. And this was pretty much all that had passed on the subject between them, save, of course, that Miriam immediately made it clear that Peter had grossly misinformed him. What had happened was that she had said she would do nothing of the sort. She professed a desire not to be confronted again with this trying theme, and Nick easily fell in with it, from a definite preference he now had not to handle that kind of subject with her. If Julia had false ideas about him, and if Peter had them too, his part of the business was to take the simplest course to establish that falsity. There were difficulties indeed attached even to the simplest course, but there would be a difficulty the less if, in conversation, one should forbear to meddle with the general suggestive topic of intimate unions. It is certain that in these days Nick cultivated the practice of forbearances for which he did not receive, for which perhaps he never would receive, due credit.

He had been convinced for some time that one of the next things he should hear would be that Mrs. Dallow had arranged to marry Mr. Macgeorge or some such leader of multitudes. He could think of that now, he found—think of it with resignation, even when Julia was before his eyes, looking so handsomely forgetful that her air had to be taken as referring still more to their original intimacy than to his comparatively superficial offence. What made this accomplishment of his own remarkable was that there was something else he thought of quite as much—the fact that he had only to see her again to feel by how great a charm she had in the old days taken possession of him. This charm operated apparently in a very direct, primitive way: her presence diffused it and fully established it, but her absence left comparatively little of it behind. It dwelt in the very facts of her person—it was something that she happened physically to be; yet (considering that the question was of something very like loveliness) its envelope of associations, of memories and recurrences, had no great density. She packed it up and took it away with her, as if she had been a woman who had come to sell a set of laces. The laces were as wonderful as ever when they were taken out of the box, but to get another look at them you had to send for the woman. What was above all remarkable was that Miriam Rooth was much less irresistible to our young man than Mrs. Dallow could be when Mrs. Dallow was on the spot. He could paint Miriam, day after day, without any agitating blur of vision; in fact the more he saw of her the clearer grew the atmosphere through which she blazed, the more her richness became one with that of the flowering

picture. There are reciprocities and special sympathies in such relations; mysterious affinities they used to be called, divinations of private congruity. Nick had an unexpressed conviction that if, as he had often wanted and proposed, he had embarked with Mrs. Dallow in this particular quest of a great prize, disaster would have overtaken them on the deep waters. Even with the limited risk, indeed, disaster had come; but it was of a different kind and it had the advantage for him that now she couldn't reproach and accuse him as the cause of it—couldn't do so at least on any ground he was obliged to recognize. She would never know how much he had cared for her, how much he cared for her still; inasmuch as the conclusive proof, for himself, was his conscious reluctance to care for another woman, which she positively misread. Some day he would doubtless try to do that; but such a day seemed as yet far off, and he had no spite, no vindictive impulse to help him. The soreness that was mingled with his liberation, the sense of indignity even, as of a full cup suddenly dashed by a blundering hand from his lips, demanded certainly a balm; but it found it for a time in another passion, not in a rancorous exercise of the same—a passion strong enough to make him forget what a pity it was that he was not made to care for two women at once.

As soon as Mrs. Dallow returned to England he broke ground to his mother on the subject of her making Julia understand that she and the girls now regarded their occupancy of Broadwood as absolutely terminated. He had already, several weeks before, picked a little at this arid tract, but in the interval the soil appeared to have formed again. It was

disagreeable to him to impose such a renunciation on Lady Agnes, and it was especially disagreeable to have to phrase it and discuss it and perhaps insist upon it. He would have liked the whole business to be tacit—a little triumph of silent delicacy. But he found reasons to suspect that what in fact would be most tacit was Julia's certain endurance of any chance *in*delicacy. Lady Agnes had a theory that they had virtually—"practically," as she said—given up the place, so that there was no need of making a splash about it; but Nick discovered, in the course of a conversation with Biddy more rigorous perhaps than any to which he had ever subjected her, that none of their property had been removed from her delightful house—none of the things (there were ever so many things) that Lady Agnes had caused to be conveyed there when they took possession. Her ladyship was the proprietor of innumerable articles of furniture, relics and survivals of her former greatness, and moved about the world with a train of heterogeneous baggage; so that her quiet overflow into the spaciousness of Broadwood had had all the luxury of a final subsidence. What Nick had to propose to her now was a dreadful combination, a relapse into all the things she most hated—seaside lodgings, bald storehouses in the Marylebone Road, little London rooms crammed with things that caught the dirt and made them stuffy. He was afraid he should really finish her, and he himself was surprised in a degree at his insistence. He wouldn't have supposed that he should have cared so much, but he found he did care intensely. He cared enough—it says everything—to explain to his mother that practically her retention of Broadwood would be the violation of an agreement. Julia had given them the place on

the understanding that he was to marry her, and since he was not to marry her they had no right to keep the place. "Yes, you make the mess and *we* pay the penalty!" Lady Agnes flashed out; but this was the only overt protest that she made, except indeed to contend that their withdrawal would be an act ungracious and offensive to Julia. She looked as she had looked during the months that succeeded his father's death, but she gave a general grim assent to the proposition that, let Julia take it as she would, their own duty was unmistakably clear.

It was Grace who was the principal representative of the idea that Julia would be outraged by such a step; she never ceased to repeat that she had never heard of anything so "nasty." Nick would have expected this of Grace, but he felt rather deserted and betrayed when Biddy murmured to him that *she* knew—that there was really no need of their sacrificing their mother's comfort to a mere fancy. She intimated that if Nick would only consent to their going on with Broadwood as if nothing had happened (or rather as if everything had happened), she would answer for Julia. For almost the first time in his life Nick disliked what Biddy said to him, and he gave her a sharp rejoinder, embodying the general opinion that they all had enough to do to answer for themselves. He remembered afterwards the way she looked at him, startled, even frightened, with rising tears, before turning away. He held that it would be time enough to judge how Julia would take it after they had thrown up the place; and he made it his duty to see that his mother should address to Mrs. Dallow by letter a formal notification of their retirement. Mrs. Dallow could protest then if she liked. Nick was

aware that in general he was not practical; he could imagine why, from his early years, people should have joked him about it. But this time he was determined that his behaviour should be founded on a rigid view of things as they were. He didn't see his mother's letter to Julia, but he knew that it went. He thought she would have been more loyal if she had shown it to him, though of course there could be but little question of loyalty now. That it had really been written however, very much on the lines he dictated, was clear to him from the subsequent surprise which Lady Agnes's blankness did not prevent him from divining.

Julia answered her letter, but in unexpected terms: she had apparently neither resisted nor protested; she had simply been very glad to get her house back again and had not accused any of them of nastiness. Nick saw no more of her letter than he had seen of his mother's, but he was able to say to Grace (to Lady Agnes he was studiously mute): "My poor child, you see, after all, that we haven't kicked up such a row." Grace shook her head and looked gloomy and deeply wise, replying that he had no cause to triumph—they were so far from having seen the end of it yet. Then he guessed that his mother had complied with his wish on the calculation that it would be a mere form, that Julia would entreat them not to be so fantastic, and that he would then, in the presence of her wounded surprise, consent to a quiet continuance, so much in the interest (the air of Broadwood had a purity!) of the health of all of them. But since Julia jumped at their relinquishment he had no chance to be mollified: he had only to persist in having been right.

At bottom, probably, he himself was a little surprised at

her eagerness. Literally speaking, it was not perfectly graceful. He was sorry his mother had been so deceived, but he was sorrier still for Biddy's mistake—it showed she might be mistaken about other things. Nothing was left now but for Lady Agnes to say, as she did, substantially, whenever she saw him: "We are to prepare to spend the autumn at Worthing then, or some other horrible place? I don't know their names: it's the only thing we can afford." There was an implication in this that if he expected her to drag her girls about to country-houses, in a continuance of the fidgety effort to work them off, he must understand at once that she was now too weary and too sad and too sick. She had done her best for them, and it had all been vain and cruel, and now the poor creatures must look out for themselves. To the grossness of Biddy's misconduct she needn't refer, nor to the golden opportunity this young lady had forfeited by her odious treatment of Mr. Grindon. It was clear that this time Lady Agnes was incurably discouraged; so much so as to fail to glean the dimmest light from the fact that the girl was really making a long stay at Harsh. Biddy went to and fro two or three times and then, in August, fairly settled there; and what her mother mainly saw in her absence was the desire to keep out of the way of household reminders of her depravity. In fact, as it turned out, Lady Agnes and Grace, in the first days of August, gathered themselves together for another visit to the old lady who had been Sir Nicholas's godmother; after which they went somewhere else, so that the question of Worthing had not to be immediately faced.

Nick stayed on in London with a passion of work fairly humming in his ears; he was conscious with joy that for

three or four months, in the empty Babylon, he would have generous days. But toward the end of August he got a letter from Grace in which she spoke of her situation, and her mother's, in a manner that made him feel he ought to do something tactful. They were paying a third visit (he knew that in Calcutta Gardens lady's-maids had been to and fro with boxes, replenishments of wardrobes), and yet somehow the outlook for the autumn was dark. Grace didn't say it in so many words, but what he read between the lines was that they had no more invitations. What therefore was to become of them? People liked them well enough when Biddy was with them, but they didn't care for her mother and her, *tout pur*, and Biddy was cooped up indefinitely with Julia. This was not the manner in which Grace used to allude to her sister's happy visits to Mrs. Dallow, and the change of tone made Nick wince with a sense of all that had collapsed. Biddy was a little fish worth landing, in short, scantily as she seemed disposed to bite, and Grace's rude probity could admit that she herself was not.

Nick had an inspiration: by way of doing something tactful he went down to Brighton and took lodgings for the three ladies, for several weeks, the quietest and sunniest he could find. This he intended as a kindly surprise, a reminder of how he had his mother's comfort at heart, how he could exert himself and save her trouble. But he had no sooner concluded his bargain (it was a more costly one than he had at first calculated) than he was bewildered, as he privately phrased it quite "stumped," at learning that the three ladies were to pass the autumn at Broadwood with Julia. Mrs. Dallow had

taken the place into familiar use again and she was now correcting their former surprise at her crude concurrence (this was infinitely characteristic of Julia) by inviting them to share it with her. Nick wondered vaguely what she was "up to;" but when his mother treated herself to the fine irony of addressing him an elaborately humble inquiry as to whether he would consent to their accepting the merciful refuge (she repeated this expression three times), he replied that she might do exactly as she liked: he would only mention that he should not feel himself at liberty to come and see her at Broadwood. This condition proved, apparently, to Lady Agnes's mind, no hindrance, and she and her daughters were presently reinstalled in the very apartments they had learned to love. This time it was even better than before; they had still fewer expenses. The expenses were Nick's: he had to pay a forfeit to the landlady at Brighton for backing out of his contract. He said nothing to his mother about this bungled business—he was literally afraid; but an event that befell at the same moment reminded him afresh that it was not the time to choose to squander money. Mr. Carteret drew his last breath; quite painlessly it seemed, as the closing scene was described at Beauclere when our young man went down to the funeral. Two or three weeks afterwards the contents of his will were made public in the *Illustrated London News*, where it definitely appeared that he had left a very large fortune, not a penny of which was to go to Nick. The provision for Mr. Chayter's declining years was very handsome.

XVI.

Miriam had mounted at a bound, in her new part, several steps in the ladder of fame, and at the climax of the London season this fact was brought home to her from hour to hour. It produced a thousand solicitations and entanglements, so that she rapidly learned that to be celebrated takes up almost as much of one's own time as of other people's. Even though, as she boasted, she had reduced to a science the practice of "working" her mother (she made use of the good lady socially to the utmost, pushing her perpetually into the breach), there were many occasions on which it was represented to her that she could not be disobliging without damaging her cause. She made almost an income out of the photographers (their appreciation of her as a subject knew no bounds), and she supplied the newspapers with columns of irreducible copy. To the gentlemen who sought speech of her on behalf of these organs she poured forth, vindictively, floods of unscrupulous romance; she told them all different tales, and as her mother told them others yet more marvellous publicity was cleverly caught by rival versions, surpassing each other in authenticity. The whole case was remarkable, was unique; for if the girl was advertised by the bewilderment of her readers, she seemed to every sceptic, when he went to see her, as fine as if he had

discovered her for himself. She was still accommodating enough however, from time to time, to find an hour to come and sit to Nick Dormer, and he helped himself further by going to her theatre whenever he could. He was conscious that Julia Dallow would probably hear of that and triumph with a fresh sense of how right she had been; but this reflection only made him sigh resignedly, so true it struck him as being that there are some things explanation can never better, can never touch.

Miriam brought Basil Dashwood once to see her portrait, and Basil, who commended it in general, directed his criticism mainly to two points—its not yet being finished and its not having gone into that year's Academy. The young actor was visibly fidgety: he felt the contagion of Miriam's rapid pace, the quick beat of her success, and, looking at everything now from the standpoint of that speculation, could scarcely contain his impatience at the painter's clumsy slowness. He thought the second picture much better than the other one, but somehow it ought by that time to be before the public. Having a great deal of familiar proverbial wisdom, he put forth with vehemence the idea that in every great crisis there is nothing like striking while the iron is hot. He even betrayed a sort of impression that with a little good-will Nick might wind up the job and still get the Academy people to take him in. Basil knew some of them; he all but offered to speak to them —the case was so exceptional; he had no doubt he could get something done. Against the appropriation of the work by Peter Sherringham he explicitly and loudly protested, in spite of the homeliest recommendations of silence from Miriam;

and it was indeed easy to guess how such an arrangement would interfere with his own conception of the eventual right place for the two portraits—the vestibule of the theatre, where every one going in and out would see them, suspended face to face and surrounded by photographs, artistically disposed, of the young actress in a variety of characters. Dashwood showed a largeness of view in the way he jumped to the conviction that in this position the pictures would really help to draw. Considering the virtue he attributed to Miriam the idea was exempt from narrow prejudice.

Moreover, though a trifle feverish, he was really genial; he repeated more than once: "Yes, my dear sir, you've done it this time." This was a favourite formula with him; when some allusion was made to the girl's success he greeted it also with a comfortable "This time she *has* done it." There was a hint of knowledge and far calculation in his tone. It appeared before he went that this time even he himself had done it—he had taken up something that would really answer. He told Nick more about Miriam, more about her affairs at that moment at least, than she herself had communicated, contributing strongly to our young man's impression that one by one every element of a great destiny was being dropped into her cup. Nick himself tasted of success vicariously for the hour. Miriam let Dashwood talk only to contradict him, and contradicted him only to show how indifferently she could do it. She treated him as if she had nothing more to learn about his folly, but as if it had taken intimate friendship to reveal to her the full extent of it. Nick didn't mind her intimate friendships, but he ended by disliking Dashwood, who

irritated him—a circumstance in which poor Julia, if it had come to her knowledge, would doubtless have found a damning eloquence. Miriam was more pleased with herself than ever: she now made no scruple of admitting that she enjoyed all her advantages. She was beginning to have a fuller vision of how successful success could be; she took everything as it came—dined out every Sunday, and even went into the country till the Monday morning; she had a hundred distinguished names on her lips and wonderful tales about the people who were making up to her. She struck Nick as less serious than she had been hitherto, as making even an aggressive show of frivolity; but he was conscious of no obligation to reprehend her for it—the less as he had a dim vision that some effect of that sort, some irritation of his curiosity, was what she desired to produce. She would perhaps have liked, for reasons best known to herself, to look as if she were throwing herself away, not being able to do anything else. He couldn't talk to her as if he took an immense interest in her career, because in fact he didn't; she remained to him primarily and essentially a pictorial subject, with the nature of whose vicissitudes he was concerned (putting common charity and his personal good-nature of course aside) only so far as they had something to say in her face. How could he know in advance what twist of her life would say most? so possible was it even that complete failure or some incalculable perversion would only make her, for his particular purpose, more magnificent.

After she had left him, at any rate, the day she came with Basil Dashwood, and still more on a later occasion, as he

turned back to his work when he had put her into her carriage, the last time, for that year, that he saw her—after she had left him it occurred to him, in the light of her quick distinction, that there were mighty differences in the famous artistic life. Miriam was already in the glow of a glory which moreover was probably but a faint spark in relation to the blaze to come; and as he closed the door upon her and took up his palette to rub it with a dirty cloth the little room in which his own battle was practically to be fought looked wofully cold and gray and mean. It was lonely, and yet it peopled with unfriendly shadows (so thick he saw them gathering in winter twilights to come) the duller conditions, the longer patiences, the less immediate and less personal joys. His late beginning was there, and his wasted youth, the mistakes that would still bring forth children after their image, the sedentary solitude, the clumsy obscurity, the poor explanations, the foolishness that he foresaw in having to ask people to wait, and wait longer, and wait again, for a fruition which, to their sense at least, would be an anti-climax. He cared enough for it, whatever it would be, to feel that his pertinacity might enter into comparison even with such a productive force as Miriam's. This was, after all, in his bare studio, the most collective dim presence, the one that was most sociable to him as he sat there and that made it the right place however wrong it was—the sense that it was to the thing in itself he was attached. This was Miriam's case, but the contrast, which she showed him she also felt, was in the number of other things that she got with the thing in itself.

I hasten to add that our young man had hours when this fine substance struck him as requiring, for a complete appeal, no adjunct whatever—as being in its own splendour a summary of all adjuncts and apologies. I have related that the great collections, the National Gallery and the Museum were sometimes rather a series of dead surfaces to him; but the sketch I have attempted of him will have been inadequate if it fails to suggest that there were other days when, as he strolled through them, he plucked right and left perfect nosegays of reassurance. Bent as he was on working in the modern, which spoke to him with a thousand voices, he judged it better, for long periods, not to haunt the earlier masters, whose conditions had been so different (later he came to see that it didn't matter much, especially if one didn't go); but he was liable to accidental deflections from this theory—liable in particular to want to take a look at one of the great portraits of the past. These were the things that were the most inspiring, in the sense that they were the things that, while generations, while worlds had come and gone, seemed most to survive and testify. As he stood before them sometimes the perfection of their survival struck him as the supreme eloquence, the reason that included all others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away; but the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the ages had only sweetened their freshness. The same faces, the same figures looked out at different centuries, knowing a deal the century didn't, and when they

joined hands they made the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung.

Miriam notified her artist that her theatre was to close on the 10th of August, immediately after which she was to start, with the company, on a tremendous tour of the provinces. They to were make a lot of money, but they were to have no holiday and she didn't want one; she only wanted to keep at it and make the most of her limited opportunities for practice; inasmuch as, at that rate, playing but two parts a year (and such parts—she despised them!) she shouldn't have mastered the rudiments of her trade before decrepitude would compel her to lay it by. The first time she came to the studio after her visit with Dashwood she sprang up abruptly, at the end of half an hour, saying she could sit no more—she had had enough of it. She was visibly restless and preoccupied, and though Nick had not waited till now to discover that she had more moods than he had tints on his palette, he had never yet seen her fitfulness at this particular angle. It was a trifle unbecoming and he was ready to let her go. She looked round the place as if she were suddenly tired of it, and then she said mechanically, in a heartless London way, while she smoothed down her gloves: "So you're just going to stay on?" After he had confessed that this was his dark purpose she continued in the same casual, talk-making manner: "I dare say it's the best thing for you. You're just going to grind, eh?"

"I see before me an eternity of grinding."

"All alone, by yourself, in this dull little hole? You *will* be conscientious, you *will* be virtuous."

"Oh, my solitude will be mitigated—I shall have models and people."

"What people—what models?" Miriam asked, before the glass, arranging her hat.

"Well, no one so good as you."

"That's a prospect!" the girl laughed; "for all the good you've got out of me!"

"You're no judge of that quantity," said Nick, "and even I can't measure it just yet. Have I been rather a brute? I can easily believe it; I haven't talked to you—I haven't amused you as I might. The truth is, painting people is a very absorbing, exclusive occupation. You can't do much to them besides."

"Yes, it's a cruel honour."

"Cruel—that's too much," Nick objected.

"I mean it's one you shouldn't confer on people you like, for when it's over it's over: it kills your interest in them and after you've finished them you don't like them any more."

"Surely I like you," Nick returned, sitting tilted back, before his picture, with his hands in his pockets.

"We've done very well: it's something not to have quarrelled," said Miriam, smiling at him now and seeming more in it. "I wouldn't have had you slight your work—I wouldn't have had you do it badly. But there's no fear of that for you," she went on. "You're the real thing and the rare bird. I haven't lived with you this way without seeing that: you're the sincere artist so much more than I. No, no, don't protest," she added, with one of her sudden fine transitions to a deeper tone. "You'll do things that will hand on

your name when my screeching is happily over. Only you do seem to me, I confess, rather high and dry here—I speak from the point of view of your comfort and of my personal interest in you. You strike me as kind of lonely, as the Americans say—rather cut off and isolated in your grandeur. Haven't you any *confrères*—fellow-artists and people of that sort? Don't they come near you?"

"I don't know them much, I've always been afraid of them, and how can they take me seriously?"

"Well, I've got *confrères*, and sometimes I wish I hadn't! But does your sister never come near you any more, or is it only the fear of meeting me?"

Nick was aware that his mother had a theory that Biddy was constantly bundled home from Rosedale Road at the approach of improper persons: she was as angry at this as if she wouldn't have been more so if the child had been suffered to stay; but the explanation he gave his present visitor was nearer the truth. He reminded Miriam that he had already told her (he had been careful to do this, so as not to let it appear she was avoided) that her sister was now most of the time in the country, staying with an hospitable relation.

"Oh yes," the girl rejoined to this, "with Mr. Sherringham's sister, Mrs.——what's her name? I always forget it." And when Nick had pronounced the word with a reluctance he doubtless failed sufficiently to conceal (he hated to talk about Mrs. Dallow; he didn't know what business Miriam had with her), she exclaimed: "That's the one—the beauty, the wonderful beauty. I shall never forget how handsome she looked the day she found me here. I don't in the least resemble

her, but I should like to have a try at that type, some day, in a comedy of manners. But who will write me a comedy of manners? There it is! The trouble would be, no doubt, that I should push her *à la charge.*"

Nick listened to these remarks in silence, saying to himself that if Miriam should have the bad taste (she seemed trembling on the brink of it) to make an allusion to what had passed between the lady in question and himself, he should dislike her utterly. It would show him she was a coarse creature after all. Her good genius interposed however, as against this hard penalty, and she quickly, for the moment at least, whisked away from the topic, demanding, àpropos of comrades and visitors, what had become of Gabriel Nash, whom she had not encountered for so many days.

"I think he's tired of me," said Nick; "he hasn't been near me, either. But, after all, it's natural—he has seen me through."

"Seen you through? Why, you've only just begun."

"Precisely, and at bottom he doesn't like to see me begin. He's afraid I'll do something."

"Do you mean he's jealous?"

"Not in the least, for from the moment one does anything one ceases to compete with him. It leaves him the field more clear. But that's just the discomfort, for him—he feels, as you said just now, kind of lonely; he feels rather abandoned and even, I think, a little betrayed. So far from being jealous he yearns for me and regrets me. The only thing he really takes seriously is to speculate and understand, to talk about the reasons and the essence of things: the people who do that are

the highest. The applications, the consequences, the vulgar little effects belong to a lower plane, to which one must doubtless be tolerant and indulgent, but which is after all an affair of comparative accidents and trifles. Indeed he'll probably tell me frankly, the next time I see him, that he can't but feel that to come down to the little questions of action—the little prudences and compromises and simplifications of practice—is for the superior person a really fatal descent. One may be inoffensive and even commendable after it, but one can scarcely pretend to be interesting. *Il en faut comme ça*, but one doesn't haunt them. He'll do his best for me; he'll come back again, but he'll come back sad, and finally he'll fade away altogether. He'll go off to Granada, or somewhere."

"The simplifications of practice?" cried Miriam. "Why, they are just precisely the most blessed things on earth. What should we do without them?"

"What indeed?" Nick echoed. "But if we need them it's because we're not superior persons. We're awful Philistines."

"I'll be one with *you*," the girl smiled. "Poor Nash isn't worth talking about. What was it but a little question of action when he preached to you, as I know he did, to give up your seat?"

"Yes, he has a weakness for giving up—he'll go with you as far as that. But I'm not giving up any more, you see. I'm pegging away, and that's gross."

"He's an idiot—*n'en parlons plus!*" Miriam dropped, gathering up her parasol, but lingering.

"Ah, never for me! He helped me at a difficult time."

"You ought to be ashamed to confess it."

"Oh, you *are* a Philistine," said Nick.

"Certainly I am," Miriam returned going toward the door, "if it makes me one to be sorry, awfully sorry and even rather angry, that I haven't before me a period of the same sort of unsociable pegging away that you have. For want of it I shall never really be good. However, if you don't tell people I've said so, they'll never know. Your conditions are far better than mine and far more respectable: you can do as many things as you like, in patient obscurity, while I'm pitchforked into the *mêlée*, and into the most improbable fame, upon the back of a solitary *cheval de bataille*, a poor broken-winded screw. I foresee that I shall be condemned for the greater part of the rest of my days (do you see that?) to play the stuff I'm acting now. I'm studying Juliet and I want awfully to do her, but really I'm mortally afraid lest, if I should succeed, I should find myself in such a box. Perhaps they'd want Juliet for ever, instead of my present part. You see amid what delightful alternatives one moves. What I want most I never shall have had—five quiet years of hard, all-round work, in a perfect company, with a manager more perfect still, playing five hundred parts and never being heard of. I may be too particular, but that's what I should have liked. I think I'm disgusting, with my successful crudities. It's discouraging; it makes one not care much what happens. What's the use, in such an age, of being good?"

"Good? Your haughty claim is that you're bad."

"I mean *good*, you know—there are other ways. Don't be stupid." And Nick's visitor tapped him—he was at the door with her—with her parasol.

"I scarcely know what to say to you, for certainly it's your fault if you get on so fast."

"I'm too clever—I'm a humbug."

"That's the way I used to be," said Nick.

Miriam rested her wonderful eyes on him; then she turned them over the room, slowly, after which she attached them again, kindly, musingly, on his own. "Ah, the pride of that—the sense of purification! He 'used' to be, forsooth! Poor me! Of course you'll say: 'Look at the sort of thing I've undertaken to produce, compared with what you have.' So it's all right. Become great in the proper way and don't expose me." She glanced back once more into the studio, as if she were leaving it for ever, and gave another last look at the unfinished canvas on the easel. She shook her head sadly. "Poor Mr. Sherringham—with *that!*" she murmured.

"Oh, I'll finish it—it will be very decent," said Nick.

"Finish it by yourself?"

"Not necessarily. You'll come back and sit when you return to London."

"Never, never, never again."

Nick stared. "Why, you've made me the most profuse offers and promises."

"Yes, but they were made in ignorance, and I've backed out of them. I'm capricious too—*faites la part de ça.* I see it wouldn't do—I didn't know it then. We're too far apart—I *am*, as you say, a Philistine." And as Nick protested with vehemence against this unscrupulous bad faith, she added: "You'll find other models; paint Gabriel Nash."

"Gabriel Nash—as a substitute for you?"

"It will be a good way to get rid of him. Paint Mrs. Dallow too," Miriam went on as she passed out of the door which Nick had opened for her—"paint Mrs. Dallow if you wish to eradicate the last possibility of a throb."

It was strange that since only a moment before Nick had been in a state of mind to which the superfluity of this reference would have been the clearest thing about it, he should now have been moved to receive it, quickly, naturally, irreflectively, with the question: "The last possibility? Do you mean in her or in me?"

"Oh, in you. I don't know anything about her."

"But that wouldn't be the effect," rejoined Nick, with the same supervening candour. "I believe that if she were to sit to me the usual law would be reversed."

"The usual law?"

"Which you cited awhile since and of which I recognize the general truth. In the case you speak of I should probably make a frightful picture."

"And fall in love with her again? Then, for God's sake, risk the daub!" Miriam laughed out, floating away to her victoria.

XVII.

Miriam had guessed happily in saying to Nick that to offer to paint Gabriel Nash would be the way to get rid of him. It was with no such invidious purpose indeed that our young man proposed to his intermittent friend to sit; rather, as August was dusty in the London streets, he had too little hope that Nash would remain in town at such a time to oblige him. Nick had no wish to get rid of his private philosopher; he liked his philosophy, and though of course premeditated paradox was the light to read him by, yet he had frequently, in detail, an inspired unexpectedness. He remained, in Rosedale Road, the man in the world who had most the quality of company. All the other men of Nick's acquaintance, all his political friends, represented, often very communicatively, their own affairs, and their own affairs alone; which, when they did it well, was the most their host could ask them. But Nash had the rare distinction that he seemed somehow to stand for *his* affairs, the said host's, with an interest in them unaffected by the ordinary social limitations of capacity. This relegated him to the class of high luxuries, and Nick was well aware that we hold our luxuries by a fitful and precarious tenure. If a friend without personal eagerness was one of the greatest of these it would be evident to the simplest mind

that by the law of distribution of earthly boons such a convenience should be expected to forfeit in duration what it displayed in intensity. He had never been without a suspicion that Nash was too good to last, though for that matter nothing had happened to confirm a vague apprehension that the particular way he would break up, or break down, would be by wishing to put Nick in relation with his other disciples.

That would practically amount to a catastrophe, Nick felt; for it was odd that one could both have a great kindness for him and not in the least, when it came to the point, yearn for a view of his belongings. His originality had always been that he appeared to have none; and if in the first instance he had introduced Nick to Miriam and her mother, that was an exception for which Peter Sherringham's interference had been in a great measure responsible. All the same however it was some time before Nick ceased to think it might eventually very well happen that to complete his education, as it were, Gabriel would wish him to foregather a little with minds formed by the same mystical influence. Nick had an instinct, in which there was no consciousness of detriment to Nash, that the pupils, perhaps even the imitators of such a genius would be, as he mentally phrased it, something awful. He could be sure, even Gabriel himself could be sure, of his own reservations, but how could either of them be sure of those of others? Imitation is a fortunate homage only in proportion as it is delicate, and there was an indefinable something in Nash's doctrine that would have been discredited by exaggeration or by zeal. Providence happily appeared to have spared it this probation; so that, after months, Nick

had to remind himself that his friend had never pressed upon his attention the least little group of fellow-mystics, nor offered to produce them for his edification. It scarcely mattered now that he was just the man to whom the superficial would attribute that sort of tail; it would probably have been hard, for example, to persuade Lady Agnes, or Julia Dallow, or Peter Sherringham, that he was not most at home in some dusky, untidy, dimly-imagined suburb of "culture," peopled by unpleasant phrasemongers who thought him a gentleman and who had no human use but to be held up in the comic press, which was probably restrained by decorum from touching upon the worst of their aberrations.

Nick, at any rate, never discovered his academy, nor the suburb in question; never caught, from the impenetrable background of his life, the least reverberation of flitting or flirting, the smallest æsthetic ululation. There were moments when he was even moved to a degree of pity by the silence that poor Gabriel's own faculty of sound made around him—when at least it qualified with thinness the mystery he could never wholly dissociate from him, the sense of the transient and occasional, the likeness to vapour or murmuring wind or shifting light. It was for instance a symbol of this unclassified condition, the lack of all position as a name in well-kept books, that Nick in point of fact had no idea where he lived, would not have known how to go and see him or send him a doctor if he had heard he was ill. He had never walked with him to any door of Gabriel's own, even to pause at the threshold, though indeed Nash had a club, the Anonymous, in some improbable square, of which Nick suspected him of

being the only member—he had never heard of another—where it was vaguely understood that letters would some day or other find him. Fortunately it was not necessary to worry about him, so comfortably his whole aspect seemed to imply that he could never be ill. And this was not perhaps because his bloom was healthy, but because it was morbid, as if he had been universally inoculated.

He turned up in Rosedale Road one day after Miriam had left London; he had just come back from a fortnight in Brittany, where he had drawn unusual refreshment from the subtle sadness of the landscape. He was on his way somewhere else; he was going abroad for the autumn, but he was not particular what he did, professing that he had returned to London on purpose to take one last superintending look at Nick. "It's very nice, it's very nice; yes, yes, I see," he remarked, giving a little general assenting sigh as his eyes wandered over the simple scene—a sigh which, to a suspicious ear, would have testified to an insidious reaction.

Nick's ear, as we know, was already suspicious; a fact which would sufficiently account for the expectant smile (it indicated the pleasant apprehension of a theory confirmed) with which he inquired: "Do you mean my pictures are nice?"

"Yes, yes, your pictures and the whole thing."

"The whole thing?"

"Your existence here, in this little remote independent corner of the great city. The disinterestedness of your attitude, the persistence of your effort, the piety, the beauty, in short the example, of the whole spectacle."

Nick broke into a laugh. "How near to having had

enough of me you must be when you talk of my example!" Nash changed colour slightly at this; it was the first time in Nick's remembrance that he had given a sign of embarrassment. "*Vous allez me lâcher*, I see it coming; and who can blame you?—for I've ceased to be in the least spectacular. I had my little hour; it was a great deal, for some people don't even have that. I've given you your curious case and I've been generous; I made the drama last for you as long as I could. You'll 'slope,' my dear fellow—you'll quietly slope; and it will be all right and inevitable, though I shall miss you greatly at first. Who knows whether, without you, I shouldn't still have been representing Harsh, heaven help me? You rescued me; you converted me from a representative into an example—that's a shade better. But don't I know where you must be when you're reduced to praising my piety?"

"Don't turn me away," said Nash plaintively; "give me a cigarette."

"I shall never dream of turning you away; I shall cherish you till the latest possible hour. I'm only trying to keep myself in tune with the logic of things. The proof of how I cling is that, precisely, I want you to sit to me."

"To sit to you?" Nick thought his visitor looked a little blank.

"Certainly, for after all it isn't much to ask. Here we are, and the hour is peculiarly propitious—long light days, with no one coming near me, so that I have plenty of time. I had a hope I should have some orders: my younger sister, whom you know and who is a great optimist, plied me with that

vision. In fact we invented together a charming sordid little theory that there might be rather a 'run' on me, from the chatter (such as it was) produced by my taking up this line. My sister struck out the idea that a good many of the pretty ladies would think me interesting, would want to be done. Perhaps they do, but they've controlled themselves, for I can't say the run has commenced. They haven't even come to look, but I dare say they don't yet quite take it in. Of course it's a bad time, with every one out of town; though you know they might send for me to come and do them at home. Perhaps they will, when they settle down. A portrait-tour of a dozen country-houses, for the autumn and winter—what do you say to that for a superior programme? I know I excruciate you," Nick added, "but don't you see how it's my interest to try how much you'll still stand?"

Gabriel puffed his cigarette with a serenity so perfect that it might have been assumed to falsify Nick's words. "Mrs. Dallow will send for you—*vous allez voir ça*," he said in a moment, brushing aside all vagueness.

"She'll send for me?"

"To paint her portrait; she'll recapture you on that basis. She'll get you down to one of the country-houses, and it will all go off as charmingly—with sketching in the morning, on days you can't hunt, and anything you like in the afternoon, and fifteen courses in the evening; there'll be bishops and ambassadors staying—as if you were a 'well-known' awfully clever amateur. Take care, take care, for, fickle as you may think me, I can read the future: don't imagine you've come to the end of me yet. Mrs. Dallow and your sister, of both

of whom I speak with the greatest respect, are capable of hatching together the most conscientious, delightful plan for you. Your differences with the beautiful lady will be patched up, and you'll each come round a little and meet the other half-way. Mrs. Dallow will swallow your profession if you'll swallow hers. She'll put up with the palette if you'll put up with the country-house. It will be a very unusual one in which you won't find a good north room where you can paint. You'll go about with her and do all her friends, all the bishops and ambassadors, and you'll eat your cake and have it, and every one, beginning with your wife, will forget there is anything queer about you, and everything will be for the best in the best of worlds; so that, together—you and she—you'll become a great social institution, and every one will think she has a delightful husband; to say nothing of course of your having a delightful wife. Ah, my dear fellow, you turn pale, and with reason!" Nash went on: "that's to pay you for having tried to make me let you have it. You have it, then, there! I may be a bore"—the emphasis of this, though a mere shade, testified to the first personal resentment Nick had ever heard his visitor express—"I may be a bore, but once in a while I strike a light, I make things out. Then I venture to repeat, 'Take care, take care.' If, as I say, I respect those ladies infinitely, it is because they will be acting according to the highest wisdom of their sex. That's the sort of thing women invent when they're exceptionally good and clever. When they're not, they don't do so well; but it's not for want of trying. There's only one thing in the world that's better than their charm: it's their conscience. That indeed

is a part of their charm. And when they club together, when they earnestly consider, as in the case we're supposing," Nash continued, "then the whole thing takes a lift; for it's no longer the conscience of the individual, it's that of the sex.'

"You're so remarkable that, more than ever, I must paint you," Nick returned, "though I'm so agitated by your prophetic words that my hand trembles and I shall doubtless scarcely be able to hold my brush. Look how I rattle my easel trying to put it into position. I see it all there, just as you say it. Yes, it will be a droll day, and more modern than anything yet, when the conscience of women perceives objections to men's being in love with them. You talk of their goodness and cleverness, and it's much to the point. I don't know what else they themselves might do with these things, but I don't see what men can do with them but be fond of them."

"Oh, you'll do it—you'll do it!" cried Nash, brightly jubilant.

"What is it I shall do?"

"Exactly what I just said; if not next year, then the year after, or the year after that. You'll go half-way to meet her, and she'll drag you about and pass you off. You'll paint the bishops and become a social institution. That is, you will if you don't take great care."

"I shall, no doubt, and that's why I cling to you. You must still look after me; don't melt away into a mere improbable reminiscence, a delightful symbolic fable—don't, if you can possibly help it. The trouble is, you see, that you

can't really keep hold very tight, because at bottom it will amuse you much more to see me in another pickle than to find me simply jogging down the vista of the years on the straight course. Let me at any rate have some sort of sketch of you, as a kind of feather from the angel's wing, or a photograph of the ghost, to prove to me in the future that you were once a solid, sociable fact, that I didn't utterly fabricate you. Of course I shall be able to say to myself that you can't have been a fable—otherwise you would have had a moral; but that won't be enough, because I'm not sure you won't have had one. Some day you'll peep in here languidly and find me in such an attitude of piety—presenting my bent back to you as I niggle over some interminable botch—that I shall give cruelly on your nerves, and you'll draw away, closing the door softly (for you'll be gentle and considerate about it and spare me—you won't even make me look round), and steal off on tiptoe, never, never to return."

Gabriel consented to sit; he professed he should enjoy it and be glad to give up for it his immediate Continental projects, so vague to Nick, so definite apparently to himself; and he came back three times for the purpose. Nick promised himself a great deal of interest from this experiment; for from the first hour he began to feel that really, as yet, compared to the scrutiny to which he now subjected him, he had never with any intensity looked at his friend. His impression had been that Nash had a head quite fine enough to be a challenge, and that as he sat there, day by day, all sorts of pleasant and paintable things would come out in his face. This impression was not falsified, but the whole problem

became more complicated. It struck our young man that he had never *seen* his subject before, and yet somehow this revelation was not produced by the sense of actually seeing it. What was revealed was the difficulty—what he saw was the indefinite and the elusive. He had taken things for granted which literally were not there, and he found things there (except that he couldn't catch them) which he had not hitherto counted in. This baffling effect, being eminently in Nash's line, might have been the result of his whimsical volition, had it not appeared to Nick, after a few hours of the job, that his sitter was not the one who enjoyed it most. He was uncomfortable, at first vaguely and then definitely so—silent, restless, gloomy, dim, as if, when it came to the test, it proved less of a pleasure to him than he could have had an idea of in advance to be infinitely examined and handled, sounded and sifted. He had been willing to try it, in good faith; but frankly he didn't like it. He was not cross, but he was clearly unhappy, and Nick had never heard him say so little, seen him give so little.

Nick felt, accordingly, as if he had laid a trap for him: he asked himself if it were really fair. At the same time there was something fascinating in the oddity of such a relation between the subject and the artist, and Nick was disposed to go on until he should have to stop for very pity. He caught eventually a glimmer of the truth that lay at the bottom of this anomaly; guessed that what made his friend uncomfortable was simply the reversal, in such a combination, of his usual terms of intercourse. He was so accustomed to living upon irony and the interpretation of things that it was

strange to him to be himself interpreted, and (as a gentleman who sits for his portrait is always liable to be) interpreted ironically. From being outside of the universe he was suddenly brought into it, and from the position of a free commentator and critic, a sort of amateurish editor of the whole affair, reduced to that of humble ingredient and contributor. It occurred afterwards to Nick that he had perhaps brought on a catastrophe by having happened to say to his companion, in the course of their disjointed pauses, and not only without any cruel intention but with an impulse of genuine solicitude: "But, my dear fellow, what will you do when you're old?"

"Old? What do you call old?" Nash had replied bravely enough, but with another perceptible tinge of irritation. "Must I really inform you, at this time of day, that that term has no application to such a condition as mine? It only belongs to you wretched people who have the incurable superstition of 'doing:' it's the ignoble collapse you prepare for yourselves when you cease to be able to do. For me there'll be no collapse, no transition, no clumsy readjustment of attitude; for I shall only *be*, more and more, with all the accumulations of experience, the longer I live."

"Oh, I'm not particular about the term," said Nick. "If you don't call it old, the ultimate state, call it weary—call it exhausted. The accumulations of experience are practically accumulative of fatigue."

"I don't know anything about weariness. I live easily—it doesn't fatigue me."

"Then you need never die," rejoined Nick.

"Certainly; I dare say I'm eternal."

Nick laughed out at this—it would be such fine news to some people. But it was uttered with perfect gravity, and it might very well have been in the spirit of that gravity that Nash failed to observe his agreement to sit again the next day. The next, and the next, and the next passed, but he never came back.

True enough, punctuality was not important for a man who felt that he had the command of all time. Nevertheless, his disappearance, "without a trace," like a personage in a fairy-tale or a melodrama, made a considerable impression on his friend, as the months went on; so that, though he had never before had the least difficulty about entering into the play of Gabriel's humour, Nick now recalled with a certain fanciful awe the unusual seriousness with which he had ranked himself among imperishable things. He wondered a little whether he had at last gone quite mad. He had never before had such a literal air, and he would have had to be mad to be so commonplace. Perhaps indeed he was acting only more than usual in his customary spirit—thoughtfully contributing, for Nick's enlivenment, a mystery to an horizon now grown unromantic. The mystery at any rate remained; another too came near being added to it. Nick had the prospect, for the future, of the harmless excitement of waiting to see when Nash would turn up, if ever, and the further diversion (it almost consoled him for the annoyance of being left with a second unfinished portrait on his hands) of imagining that the picture he had begun had a singular air of gradually fading from the canvas. He couldn't catch it in the act, but he could have a suspicion,

when he glanced at it, that the hand of time was rubbing it away little by little (for all the world as in some delicate Hawthorne tale), making the surface indistinct and bare—bare of all resemblance to the model. Of course the moral of the Hawthorne tale would be that this personage would come back on the day when the last adumbration should have vanished.

XVIII.

One day, toward the end of March of the following year, or in other words more than six months after the incident I have last had occasion to narrate, Bridget Dormer came into her brother's studio and greeted him with the effusion that accompanies a return from an absence. She had been staying at Broadwood—she had been staying at Harsh. She had various things to tell him about these episodes, about his mother, about Grace, about herself, and about Percy's having come, just before, over to Broadwood for two days; the longest visit with which, almost since they could remember, the head of the family had honoured Lady Agnes. Nick noted however that it had apparently been taken as a great favour, and Biddy loyally testified to the fact that her elder brother was awfully jolly and that his presence had been a pretext for tremendous fun. Nick asked her what had passed about his marriage—what their mother had said to him.

"Oh, nothing," Biddy replied; and he had said nothing to Lady Agnes and not a word to herself. This partly explained, for Nick, the awful jollity and the tremendous fun—none but cheerful topics had been produced; but he questioned his sister further, to a point which led her to say: "Oh, I dare say that before long she'll write to her."

"Who will write to whom?"

"Mamma 'll write to his wife. I'm sure he'd like it. Of course we shall end by going to see her. He was awfully disappointed at what he found in Spain—he didn't find anything."

Biddy spoke of his disappointment almost with commiseration, for she was evidently inclined this morning to a fresh and kindly view of things. Nick could share her feeling only so far as was permitted by a recognition merely general of what his brother must have looked for. It might have been snipe and it might have been bristling boars. Biddy was indeed brief, at first, about everything, in spite of the two months that had intervened since their last meeting; for he saw in a few minutes that she had something behind—something that made her gay and that she wanted to come to quickly. Nick was vaguely vexed at her being, fresh from Broadwood, so gay as that; for (it was impossible to shut one's eyes to it) what had come to pass, in practice, in regard to that rural retreat, was exactly what he had desired to avert. All winter, while it had been taken for granted that his mother and sisters were doing what he wished, they had been doing the precise contrary. He held Biddy perhaps least responsible, and there was no one he could exclusively blame. He washed his hands of the matter and succeeded fairly well for the most part in forgetting that he was not pleased. Julia Dallow herself in fact appeared to have been the most active member of the little group united to make light of his scruples. There had been a formal restitution of the place, but the three ladies were there more than ever, with

the slight difference that they were mainly there with its mistress. Mahomet had declined to go any more to the mountain, so the mountain had virtually come to Mahomet.

After their long visit in the autumn Lady Agnes and her girls had come back to town; but they had gone down again for Christmas, and Julia had taken this occasion to write to Nick that she hoped very much he wouldn't refuse them all his own company for just a little scrap of the supremely sociable time. Nick, after reflection, judged it best not to refuse, and he spent three days under Mrs. Dallow's roof. The "all" proved a great many people, for she had taken care to fill the house. She was a magnificent entertainer, and Nick had never seen her so splendid, so free-handed, so gracefully practical. She was a perfect mistress of the revels; she had organized something festive for every day and for every night. The Dormers were so much in it, as the phrase was, that after all their discomfiture their fortune seemed in an hour to have come back. There had been a moment when, in extemporized charades, Lady Agnes, an elderly figure being required, appeared on the point of undertaking the part of the housekeeper at a castle, who, dropping her *h*'s, showed sheeplike tourists about; but she waived the opportunity in favour of her daughter Grace. Even Grace had a great success. Nick of course was in the charades and in everything, but Julia was not; she only invented, directed, led the applause. When nothing else was going on Nick "sketched" the whole company: they followed him about, they waylaid him on staircases, clamouring to be allowed to sit. He obliged them, so far as he could, all save Julia, who didn't clamour; and,

growing rather red, he thought of Gabriel Nash while he bent over the paper. Early in the new year he went abroad for six weeks, but only as far as Paris. It was a new Paris for him then: a Paris of the Rue Bonaparte and three or four professional friends (he had more of these there than in London); a Paris of studios and studies and models, of researches and revelations, comparisons and contrasts, of strong impressions and long discussions and rather uncomfortable economies, small cafés and bad fires and the general sense of being twenty again.

While he was away his mother and sisters (Lady Agnes now sometimes wrote to him) returned to London for a month, and before he was again established in Rosedale Road they went back for a third period to Broadwood. After they had been there five days—and this was the salt of the whole dish—Julia took herself off to Harsh, leaving them in undisturbed possession. They had remained so; they would not come up to town till after Easter. The trick was played, and Biddy, as I have mentioned, was now very content. Her brother presently learned however that the reason of this was not wholly the success of the trick; unless indeed her further ground was only a continuation of it. She was not in London as a forerunner of her mother; she was not even as yet in Calcutta Gardens. She had come to spend a week with Florence Tressilian, who had lately taken the dearest little flat in a charming new place, just put up, on the other side of the Park, with all kinds of lifts and tubes and electricities. Florence had been awfully nice to her—she had been with them ever so long at Broadwood, while the flat was being

painted and prepared—and mamma had then let her, let Biddy, promise to come to her, when everything was ready, so that they might have a kind of old maids' house-warming together. If Florence could do without a chaperon now (she had two latch-keys and went alone on the top of omnibuses, and her name was in the Red Book), she was enough of a duenna for another girl. Biddy alluded, with sweet and cynical eyes, to the fine, happy stride she had thus taken in the direction of enlightened spinsterhood; and Nick hung his head, somewhat abashed and humiliated, for, modern as he had supposed himself, there were evidently currents more modern yet.

It so happened on this particular morning Nick had drawn out of a corner his interrupted study of Gabriel Nash; for no purpose more definite (he had only been looking round the room in a rummaging spirit) than to see curiously how much or how little of it remained. It had become to his apprehension such a shadowy affair (he was sure of this, and it made him laugh) that it didn't seem worth putting away, and he left it leaning against a table, as if it had been a blank canvas or a "preparation" to be painted over. In this attitude it attracted Biddy's attention, for to her, on a second glance, it had distinguishable features. She had not seen it before and she asked whom it might represent, remarking also that she could almost guess, but not quite: she had known the original, but she couldn't name him.

"Six months ago, for a few days, it represented Gabriel Nash," Nick replied. "But it doesn't represent anybody or anything now."

"Six months ago? What's the matter with it and why don't you go on?"

"What's the matter with it is more than I can tell you. But I can't go on, because I've lost my model."

Biddy stared an instant. "Is he dead?"

Her brother laughed out at the candid cheerfulness, hopefulness almost, with which this inquiry broke from her. "He's only dead to me. He has gone away."

"Where has he gone?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Why, have you quarrelled?" Biddy asked.

"Quarrelled? For what do you take us? Does the nightingale quarrel with the moon?"

"I needn't ask which of you is the moon," said Biddy.

"Of course I'm the nightingale. But, more literally," Nick continued, "Nash has melted back into the elements—he is part of the ambient air." Then, as even with this literalness he saw that his sister was mystified, he added: "I have a notion he has gone to India, and at the present moment is reclining on a bank of flowers in the vale of Cashmere."

Biddy was silent a minute, after which she dropped: "Julia will be glad—she dislikes him so."

"If she dislikes him, why should she be glad he's in such a delightful situation?"

"I mean about his going away; she'll be glad of that."

"My poor child, what has Julia to do with it?"

"She has more to do with things than you think," Biddy replied, with some eagerness; but she had no sooner uttered

the words than she perceptibly blushed. Hereupon, to attenuate the foolishness of her blush (only it had the opposite effect), she added: "She thinks he has been a bad element in your life."

Nick shook his head, smiling. "She thinks, perhaps, but she doesn't think enough; otherwise, she would arrive at this thought—that she knows nothing whatever about my life."

"Ah, Nick," the girl pleaded, with solemn eyes, "you don't imagine what an interest she takes in it. She has told me, many times—she has talked lots to me about it." Biddy paused and then went on, with an anxious little smile shining through her gravity, as if she were trying cautiously how much her brother would take: "She has a conviction that it was Mr. Nash who made trouble between you."

"My dear Biddy," Nick rejoined, "those are thoroughly second-rate ideas, the result of a perfectly superficial view. Excuse my possibly priggish tone, but they really attribute to Nash a part he's quite incapable of playing. He can neither make trouble nor take trouble; no trouble could ever either have come out of him or have gone into him. Moreover," our young man continued, "if Julia has talked to you so much about the matter, there's no harm in my talking to you a little. When she threw me over in an hour, it was on a perfectly definite occasion. That occasion was the presence in my studio of a dishevelled actress."

"Oh Nick, she has not thrown you over!" Biddy protested. "She has not—I have the proof."

Nick felt, at this direct denial, a certain stir of indignation,

and he looked at his sister with momentary sternness. "Has she sent you here to tell me this? What do you mean by the proof?"

Biddy's eyes, at these questions, met her brother's with a strange expression, and for a few seconds, while she looked entreatingly into his own, she wavered there, with parted lips, vaguely stretching out her hands. The next minute she had burst into tears—she was sobbing on his breast. He said "Hallo!" and soothed her; but it was very quickly over. Then she told him what she meant by her "proof," and what she had had on her mind ever since she came into the room. It was a message from Julia, but not to say—not to say what he had asked her just before if she meant; though indeed Biddy, more familiar now, since her brother had had his arm round her, boldly expressed the hope that it might in the end come to the same thing. Julia simply wanted to know (she had instructed Biddy to sound him discreetly) if Nick would undertake her portrait; and the girl wound up this experiment in "sounding" by the statement that their beautiful kinswoman was dying to sit.

"Dying to sit?" repeated Nick, whose turn it was, this time, to feel his colour rise.

"Any time you like after Easter, when she comes up to town. She wants a full-length, and your very best, your most splendid work."

Nick stared, not caring that he had blushed. "Is she serious?"

"Ah, Nick — serious!" Biddy reasoned tenderly. She came nearer to him, and he thought she was going to weep

again. He took her by the shoulders, looking into her eyes.

"It's all right, if she knows *I* am. But why doesn't she come like any one else? I don't refuse people!"

"Nick, dearest Nick!" she went on, with her eyes conscious and pleading. He looked into them intently—as well as she, he could play at sounding—and for a moment, between these young persons, the air was lighted by the glimmer of mutual searchings and suppressed confessions. Nick read deep, and then, suddenly releasing his sister, he turned away. She didn't see his face in that movement, but an observer to whom it had been presented might have fancied that it denoted a foreboding which was not exactly a dread, yet was not exclusively a joy.

The first thing Nick made out in the room, when he could distinguish, was Gabriel Nash's portrait, which immediately filled him with an unreasoning resentment. He seized it and turned it about; he jammed it back into its corner, with its face against the wall. This bustling transaction might have served to carry off the embarrassment with which he had finally averted himself from Biddy. The embarrassment however was all his own; none of it was reflected in the way Biddy resumed, after a silence in which she had followed his disposal of the picture:

"If she's so eager to come here (for it's here that she wants to sit, not in Great Stanhope Street—never!) how can she prove better that she doesn't care a bit if she meets Miss Rooth?"

"She won't meet Miss Rooth," Nick replied, rather dryly.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" said Biddy. She was as frank as if she had achieved a sort of victory over her companion; and she seemed to regret the loss of a chance for Mrs. Dallow to show magnanimity. Her tone made her brother laugh, but she went on, with confidence: "She thought it was Mr. Nash who made Miss Rooth come."

"So he did, by the way," said Nick.

"Well, then, wasn't that making trouble?"

"I thought you admitted there was no harm in her being here."

"Yes, but he hoped there would be."

"Poor Nash's hopes!" Nick laughed. "My dear child, it would take a cleverer head than you or me, or even Julia, who must have invented that wise theory, to say what they were. However, let us agree, that even if they were perfectly devilish my good sense has been a match for them."

"Oh, Nick, that's delightful!" chanted Biddy. Then she added, "Do you mean she doesn't come any more?"

"The dishevelled actress? She hasn't been near me for months."

"But she's in London—she's always acting? I've been away so much I've scarcely observed," Biddy explained, with a slight change of note.

"The same part, poor creature, for nearly a year. It appears that that's success, in her profession. I saw her in the character several times last summer, but I haven't set foot in her theatre since."

Biddy was silent a moment; then she suggested: "Peter wouldn't have liked that."

"Oh, Peter's likes!" sighed Nick, at his easel, beginning to work.

"I mean her acting the same part for a year."

"I'm sure I don't know; he has never written me a word."

"Nor me either," Biddy returned.

There was another short silence, during which Nick brushed at a panel. It was terminated by his presently saying: "There's one thing, certainly, Peter *would* like—that is simply to be here to-night. It's a great night—another great night—for the dishevelled one. She's to act Juliet for the first time."

"Ah, how I should like to see her!" the girl cried.

Nick glanced at her; she sat watching him. "She has sent me a stall; I wish she had sent me two. I should have been delighted to take you."

"Don't you think you could get another?" asked Biddy.

"They must be in tremendous demand. But who knows, after all?" Nick added, at the same moment, looking round. "Here's a chance — here's a quite extraordinary chance!"

His servant had opened the door and was ushering in a lady whose identity was indeed justly indicated in those words. "Miss Rooth!" the man announced; but he was caught up by a gentleman who came next and who exclaimed, laughing and with a gesture gracefully corrective: "No, no—no longer Miss Rooth!"

Miriam entered the place with her charming familiar grandeur, as she might have appeared, as she appeared every night, early in her first act, at the back of the stage, by the immemorial central door, presenting herself to the house,

taking easy possession, repeating old movements, looking from one to the other of the actors before the footlights. The rich "Good morning" that she threw into the air, holding out her hand to Biddy Dormer and then giving her left to Nick (as she might have given it to her own brother), had nothing to tell of intervals or alienations. She struck Biddy as still more terrible, in her splendid practice, than when she had seen her before—the practice and the splendour had now something almost royal. The girl had had occasion to make her courtesy to majesties and highnesses, but the flutter those effigies produced was nothing to the way in which, at the approach of this young lady, the agitated air seemed to recognize something supreme. So the deep, mild eyes that she bent upon Biddy were not soothing, though they were evidently intended to soothe. The girl wondered that Nick could have got so used to her (he joked at her as she came), and later in the day, still under the great impression of this incident, she even wondered that Peter could. It was true that Peter apparently hadn't.

"You never came—you never came," said Miriam to Biddy, kindly, sadly; and Biddy recognizing the allusion, the invitation to visit the actress at home, had to explain how much she had been absent from London, and then even that her brother hadn't proposed to take her. "Very true—he hasn't come himself. What is he doing now?" Miriam asked, standing near Biddy, but looking at Nick, who had immediately engaged in conversation with his other visitor, a gentleman whose face came back to the girl. She had seen this gentleman on the stage with Miss Rooth—that was it, the night

Peter took her to the theatre with Florence Tressilian. Oh, that Nick would only do something of that sort now! This desire, quickened by the presence of the strange, expressive woman, by the way she scattered sweet syllables as if she were touching the piano-keys, combined with other things to make Biddy's head swim—other things too mingled to name, admiration and fear and dim divination and purposeless pride and curiosity and resistance, the impulse to go away and the determination not to go. The actress courted her with her voice (what was the matter with her and what did she want?) and Biddy tried in return to give an idea of what Nick was doing. Not succeeding very well she was going to appeal to her brother, but Miriam stopped her, saying it didn't matter; besides, Dashwood was telling Nick something—something they wanted him to know. "We're in a great excitement—he has taken a theatre," Miriam added.

"Taken a theatre?" Biddy was vague.

"We're going to set up for ourselves. He's going to do for me altogether. It has all been arranged only within a day or two. It remains to be seen how it will answer," Miriam smiled. Biddy murmured some friendly hope, and her interlocurtess went on: "Do you know why I've broken in here to-day, after a long absence—interrupting your poor brother, taking up his precious time! It's because I'm so nervous."

"About your first night?" Biddy risked.

"Do you know about that—are you coming?" Miriam asked, quickly.

"No, I'm not coming—I haven't a place."

"Will you come if I send you one?"

"Oh, but really, it's too beautiful of you," stammered the girl.

"You shall have a box; your brother shall bring you. You can't squeeze in a pin, I'm told; but I've kept a box, I'll manage it. Only, if I do, you know, mind you come!" Miriam exclaimed, in suppliance, resting her hand on Biddy's.

"Don't be afraid! And may I bring a friend—the friend with whom I'm staying?"

Miriam looked at her. "Do you mean Mrs. Dallow?"

"No, no—Miss Tressilian. She puts me up, she has got a flat. Did you ever see a flat?" asked Biddy, expansively. "My cousin's not in London." Miriam replied that she might bring whom she liked, and Biddy broke out, to her brother: "Fancy what kindness, Nick: we're to have a box to-night, and you're to take me!"

Nick turned to her, smiling, with an expression in his face which struck her even at the time as odd, but which she understood when the sense of it recurred to her later. Mr. Dashwood interposed with the remark that it was all very well to talk about boxes, but that he didn't see where at that time of day any such luxury was to come from.

"You haven't kept one, as I told you?" Miriam demanded.

"As you told me, my dear? Tell the lamb to keep its tender mutton from the wolves!"

"You shall have one: we'll arrange it," Miriam went on, to Biddy.

"Let me qualify that statement a little, Miss Dormer,"

said Basil Dashwood. "We'll arrange if it's humanly possible."

"We'll arrange it even if it's inhumanly impossible—that's just the point," Miriam declared, to the girl. "Don't talk about trouble—what's he meant for but to take it? *Cela s'annonce bien*, you see," she continued, to Nick: "doesn't it look as if we should pull beautifully together?" And as he replied that he heartily congratulated her—he was immensely interested in what he had been told—she exclaimed, after resting her eyes on him a moment: "What will you have? It seemed simpler! It was clear there had to be some one." She explained further to Nick what had led her to come in at that moment, while Dashwood approached Biddy with civil assurances that they would see, they would leave no stone unturned, though he would not have taken it upon himself to promise.

Miriam reminded Nick of the blessing he had been to her nearly a year before, on her other first night, when she was fidgety and impatient: how he had let her come and sit there for hours—helped her to possess her soul till the evening and keep out of harm's way. The case was the same at present, with the aggravation indeed that he would understand—Dashwood's nerves as well as her own: they were a great deal worse than hers. Everything was ready for Juliet; they had been rehearsing for five months (it had kept her from going mad, with the eternity of the other piece), and *he* had occurred to her again in the last intolerable hours as the friend in need, the salutary stop-gap, no matter how much she bothered him. She shouldn't be turned out? Biddy

broke away from Basil Dashwood: she must go, she must hurry off to Miss Tressilian with her news. Florence might make some stupid engagement for the evening: she must be warned in time. The girl took a flushed, excited leave, after having received a renewal of Miriam's pledge and even heard her say to Nick that he must now give back the stall that had been sent him—they would be sure to have another use for it.

XIX.

THAT night, at the theatre, in the box (the miracle had been wrought, the treasure was found), Nick Dormer pointed out to his two companions the stall he had relinquished, which was close in front—noting how oddly, during the whole of the first act, it remained vacant. The house was magnificent, the actress was magnificent, everything was magnificent. To describe again so famous an occasion (it has been described repeatedly by other reporters) is not in the compass of the closing words of a history already too sustained. It is enough to say that this great night marked an era in contemporary art, and that for those who had a spectator's share in it the word "triumph" acquired a new illustration. Miriam's Juliet was an exquisite image of young passion and young despair, expressed in the divinest, truest music that had ever poured from tragic lips. The great childish audience, gaping at her points, expanded there before her like a lap to catch flowers.

During the first interval our three friends in the box had plenty to talk about, and they were so occupied with it that for some time they failed to observe that a gentleman had at last come into the empty stall near the front. This discovery was presently formulated by Miss Tressilian, in the cheerful exclamation: "Only fancy—there's Mr. Sherringham!" This

of course immediately became a high wonder—a wonder for Nick and Biddy, who had not heard of his return; and the marvel was increased by the fact that he gave no sign of looking for them, or even at them. Having taken possession of his place he sat very still in it, staring straight before him at the curtain. His abrupt reappearance contained mystifying elements both for Biddy and for Nick, so that it was mainly Miss Tressilian who had freedom of mind to throw off the theory that he had come back that very hour—had arrived from a long journey. Couldn't they see how strange he was and how brown, how burnt and how red, how tired and how worn? They all inspected him, though Biddy declined Miss Tressilian's glass; but he was evidently unconscious of observation, and finally Biddy, leaning back in her chair, dropped the fantastic words: "He has come home to marry Juliet."

Nick glanced at her; then he replied: "What a disaster—to make such a journey as that and to be late for the fair!"

"Late for the fair?"

"Why, she's married—these three days. They did it very quietly; Miriam says because her mother hated it and hopes it won't be much known. All the same she's Basil Dashwood's wedded wife—he has come in just in time to take the receipts for Juliet. It's a good thing, no doubt, for there are at least two fortunes to be made out of her, and he'll give up the stage." Nick explained to Miss Tressilian, who had inquired, that the gentleman in question was the actor who was playing Mercutio, and he asked Biddy if she had not known that this was what they were telling him in Rosedale Road in the morning. She replied that she had not understood, and she sank

considerably behind the drapery of the box. From this cover she was able to launch creditably enough the exclamation—

"Poor Peter!"

Nick got up and stood looking at poor Peter. "He ought to come round and speak to us, but if he doesn't see us I suppose he doesn't." Nick quitted the box as if to go to the restored exile. I may add that as soon as he had done so Florence Tressilian bounded over to the dusky corner in which Biddy had nestled. What passed immediately between these young ladies need not concern us: it is sufficient to mention that two minutes later Miss Tressilian broke out—

"Look at him, dearest; he's turning his head this way!"

"Thank you, I don't care to look at him," said Biddy; and she doubtless demeaned herself in the high spirit of these words. It nevertheless happened that directly afterwards she became aware that he had glanced at his watch, as if to judge how soon the curtain would rise again, and then had jumped up and passed quickly out of his place. The curtain had risen again without his coming back and without Nick's reappearing in the box. Indeed by the time Nick slipped in a good deal of the third act was over; and even then, even when the curtain descended, Peter Sherringham had not returned. Nick sat down in silence, to watch the stage, to which the breathless attention of his companions seemed to be attached, though Biddy after a moment threw back at him a single quick look. At the end of the act they were all occupied with the recalls, the applause and the responsive loveliness of Juliet as she was led out (Mercutio had to give her up to Romeo), and even for

a few minutes after the uproar had subsided nothing was said among the three. At last Nick began:

"It's quite true, he has just arrived; he's in Great Stanhope Street. They've given him several weeks, to make up for the uncomfortable way they bundled him off (to arrive in time for some special business that had suddenly to be gone into) when he first went out: he tells me they promised that at the time. He got into Southampton only a few hours ago, rushed up by the first train he could catch and came off here without any dinner."

"Fancy!" said Miss Tressilian; while Biddy asked if Peter might be in good health and had been happy. Nick replied that he said it was a beastly place, but he appeared all right. He was to be in England probably a month, he was awfully brown, he sent his love to Biddy. Miss Tressilian looked at his empty stall and was of the opinion that it would be more to the point for him to come in to see her.

"Oh, he'll turn up; we had a goodish talk in the lobby, where he met me. I think he went out somewhere."

"How odd to come so many thousand miles for this, and then not to stay!" Biddy reflected.

"Did he come on purpose for this?" Miss Tressilian asked.

"Perhaps he's gone out to get his dinner!" joked Biddy.

Her friend suggested that he might be behind the scenes, but Nick expressed a doubt of this; and Biddy asked her brother if he himself were not going round. At this moment the curtain rose: Nick said he would go in the next interval. As soon as it came he quitted the box, remaining absent while it lasted.

All this time, in the house, there was no sign of Peter. Nick reappeared only as the fourth act was beginning, and uttered no word to his companions till it was over. Then, after a further delay produced by renewed evidences of the actress's victory, he described his visit to the stage and the wonderful spectacle of Miriam on the field of battle. Miss Tressilian inquired if he had found Mr. Sherringham with her; to which he replied that, save across the footlights, she had not seen him. At this a soft exclamation broke from Biddy:

"Poor Peter! Where is he, then?"

Nick hesitated a moment. "He's walking the streets."

"Walking the streets?"

"I don't know—I give it up!" Nick replied; and his tone, for some minutes, reduced his companions to silence. But a little later Biddy said:

"Was it for him, this morning, she wanted that place, when she asked you to give yours back?"

"For him, exactly. It's very odd that she just managed to keep it, for all the use he makes of it! She told me just now that she heard from him, at his post, a short time ago, to the effect that he had seen in a newspaper a statement she was going to do Juliet and that he firmly intended, though the ways and means were not clear to him (his leave of absence hadn't yet come out, and he couldn't be sure when it would come), to be present on her first night: therefore she must do him the service to keep a seat for him. She thought this a speech rather in the air, so that in the midst of all her cares she took no particular pains about the matter. She had an

idea she had really done with him for a long time. But this afternoon what does he do but telegraph her from Southampton that he keeps his appointment and counts upon her for a stall? Unless she had got back mine she wouldn't have been able to accommodate him. When she was in Rosedale Road this morning she hadn't received his telegram; but his promise, his threat, whatever it was, came back to her; she had a sort of foreboding and thought that, on the chance, she had better have something ready. When she got home she found his telegram, and she told me that he was the first person she saw in the house, through her fright, when she came on in the second act. It appears she was terrified this time, and it lasted half through the play."

"She must be rather annoyed at his having gone away," Miss Tressilian observed.

"Annoyed? I'm not so sure!" laughed Nick.

"Ah, here he comes back!" cried Biddy, behind her fan, as the absentee edged into his seat in time for the fifth act. He stood there a moment, first looking round the theatre; then he turned his eyes upon the box occupied by his relatives, smiling and waving his hand.

"After that he'll surely come and see you," said Miss Tressilian.

"We shall see him as we go out," Biddy replied: "he must lose no more time."

Nick looked at him with a glass; then he exclaimed: "Well, I'm glad he has pulled himself together!"

"Why, what's the matter with him, since he wasn't disappointed in his seat?" Miss Tressilian demanded.

"The matter with him is that a couple of hours ago he had a great shock."

"A great shock?"

"I may as well mention it at last," Nick went on. "I had to say something to him in the lobby there, when we met—something I was pretty sure he couldn't like. I let him have it full in the face—it seemed to me better and wiser. I told him Juliet's married."

"Didn't he know it?" asked Biddy, who, with her face raised, had listened in deep stillness to every word that fell from her brother.

"How should he have known it? It has only just happened, and they've been so clever, for reasons of their own (those people move among a lot of considerations that are absolutely foreign to us), about keeping it out of the papers. They put in a lot of lies, and they leave out the real things."

"You don't mean to say Mr. Sherringham wanted to *marry* her!" Miss Tressilian ejaculated.

"Don't ask me what he wanted—I dare say we shall never know. One thing is very certain: that he didn't like my news and that I sha'n't soon forget the look in his face as he turned away from me, slipping out into the street. He was too much upset—he couldn't trust himself to come back; he had to walk about—he tried to walk it off."

"Let us hope he *has* walked it off!"

"Ah, poor fellow—he couldn't hold out to the end; he has had to come back and look at her once more. He knows she'll be sublime in these last scenes."

"Is he so much in love with her as that? What difference

does it make, with an actress, if she *is* mar— ?" But in this rash inquiry Miss Tressilian suddenly checked herself.

"We shall probably never know how much he has been in love with her nor what difference it makes. We shall never know exactly what he came back for, nor why he couldn't stand it out there any longer without relief, nor why he scrambled down here all but straight from the station, nor why, after all, for the last two hours, he has been roaming the streets. And it doesn't matter, for it's none of our business. But I'm sorry for him—she *is* going to be sublime," Nick added. The curtain was rising on the tragic climax of the play.

Miriam Rooth was sublime; yet it may be confided to the reader that during these supreme scenes Bridget Dormer directed her eyes less to the inspired actress than to a figure in the stalls who sat with his own gaze fastened to the stage. It may further be intimated that Peter Sherringham, though he saw but a fragment of the performance, read clear at the last, in the intense light of genius that this fragment shed, that even so, after all, he had been rewarded for his formidable journey. The great trouble of his infatuation subsided, leaving behind it something tolerably deep and pure. This assuagement was far from being immediate, but it was helped on, unexpectedly to him, it began to dawn at least, the very next night he saw the play, when he sat through the whole of it. Then he felt somehow recalled to reality by the very perfection of the representation. He began to come back to it from a period of miserable madness. He had been baffled, he had got his answer; it must last him—that was plain. He didn't fully accept it the first week or the second; but he

accepted it sooner than he would have supposed had he known what it was to be when he paced at night, under the southern stars, the deck of the ship that was bringing him to England.

It had been, as we know, Miss Tressilian's view, and even Biddy's, that evening, that Peter Sherringham would join them as they left the theatre. This view however was not confirmed by the event, for the gentleman in question vanished utterly (disappointingly crude behaviour on the part of a young diplomatist who had distinguished himself), before any one could put a hand on him. And he failed to make up for his crudity by coming to see any one the next day, or even the next. Indeed many days elapsed, and very little would have been known about him had it not been that, in the country, Mrs. Dallow knew. What Mrs. Dallow knew was eventually known to Biddy Dormer; and in this way it could be established in his favour that he had remained some extraordinarily small number of days in London, had almost directly gone over to Paris to see his old chief. He came back from Paris—Biddy knew this not from Mrs. Dallow, but in a much more immediate way: she knew it by his pressing the little electric button at the door of Florence Tressilian's flat, one day when the good Florence was out and she herself was at home. He made on this occasion a very long visit. The good Florence knew it not much later, you may be sure (and how he had got their address from Nick), and she took an extravagant satisfaction in it. Mr. Sherringham had never been to see her—the like of her—in his life: therefore it was clear what had made him begin. When he had once begun he kept it up, and Miss Tressilian's satisfaction increased.

Good as she was she could remember without the slightest relenting what Nick Dormer had repeated to them at the theatre about Peter's present post's being a beastly place. However, she was not bound to make a stand at this if persons more nearly concerned, Lady Agnes and the girl herself, didn't mind it. How little *they* minded it, and Grace, and Julia Dallow, and even Nick, was proved in the course of a meeting that took place at Harsh during the Easter holidays. Mrs. Dallow had a small and intimate party to celebrate her brother's betrothal. The two ladies came over from Broadwood; even Nick, for two days, went back to his old hunting-ground, and Miss Tressilian relinquished for as long a time the delights of her newly-arranged flat. Peter Sherringham obtained an extension of leave, so that he might go back to his legation with a wife. Fortunately, as it turned out, Biddy's ordeal, in the more or less torrid zone, was not cruelly prolonged, for the pair have already received a superior appointment. It is Lady Agnes's proud opinion that her daughter is even now shaping their destiny. I say "even now," for these facts bring me very close to contemporary history. During those two days at Harsh Nick arranged with Julia Dallow the conditions, as they might be called, under which she should sit to him; and every one will remember in how recent an exhibition general attention was attracted, as the newspapers said in describing the private view, to the noble portrait of a lady which was the final outcome of that arrangement. Gabriel Nash had been at many a private view, but he was not at that one.

These matters are highly recent however, as I say; so that

in glancing about the little circle of the interests I have tried to evoke I am suddenly warned by a sharp sense of modernness. This renders it difficult for me, for example, in taking leave of our wonderful Miriam, to do much more than allude to the general impression that her remarkable career is even yet only in its early prime. Basil Dashwood has got his theatre, and his wife (people know now she *is* his wife) has added three or four new parts to her repertory; but every one is agreed that both in public and in private she has a great deal more to show. This is equally true of Nick Dormer, in regard to whom I may finally say that his friend Nash's predictions about his reunion with Mrs. Dallow have not up to this time been justified. On the other hand, I must not omit to add, this lady has not, at the latest accounts, married Mr. Macgeorge. It is very true there has been a rumour that Mr. Macgeorge is worried about her—has even ceased to believe in her.

THE END.

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